

I Survived A Cult:

Personal Glimpses of an Exodus

by John Collins

“We shall draw from the heart of suffering itself
the means of inspiration and survival.”
- Winston Churchill

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From A Father To His Son

“Son, there are two people I hate most in life: a thief and a liar.”

These words were a big part of my childhood. Words spoken from a father to a son, in a sense given as advice for the answers to life’s tough decisions, they were repeated often. In adolescent years, they seemed to be directed at my own shortcomings, but later in life they would form the man I was to become.

One might suggest alterations to this phrase. “Hate” is a harsh word to use in the context of another human being. Psychological studies indicate that environmental conditions contribute to the choices in life, and that a thief raised from birth in a good home with a loving mother providing plenty of food, shelter, and other conditions would not be tempted to steal. Instead of hate, we should offer them a better way.

Others might suggest that age and experience changes this view. As we mature, we realize that all people struggle in different areas. Though we may try to hide it, each one of us must endure the trials in life that come our way. Each one of us must be faced with the opportunity to choose between right or wrong, and will sometimes choose incorrectly. It’s from those choices that we learn and grow.

Religious leaders in reformed Christian churches might suggest that we are all guilty of such

treachery. "All men have fallen short," and "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Examine our own hearts, and we'll find an abundance of evil. Let God change what is on the inside, and you will find the outside cleansed from within.

Dissected and examined by men with life experience, these words can be the focal point of a thousand discussions that lead to personal growth. But given as a proverb from a father to a growing son, these words are taken at face value: we are to hate both thieves and liars. There can be no salvation for a thief, and no opportunity of repentance for a liar. "All liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone."

For myself, it was very much a black-and-white set of moral standards. There could be no gray, for good and evil cannot mix. The "thief and the liar" proverb can be applied to almost every circumstance. If the neighbor ran out of space and used your trash bin, he was stealing from you. If the sales representative did not fully explain the hidden fees, she lied to you. When the government demanded income tax to provide protection, paved roads, and other freedoms, they were the worst of thieves. Each and every person that comes in contact must fall into four categories: those who stole, those who lied, those who did both, and those who did neither.

The moral values contained in this proverb are powerful to a child. In a world where moral values appear to decline, children need a strong foundation from which to define the positive side of their personality. If parents would combine this proverb with others containing examples of compassion, love, forgiveness and understanding, they could easily create peace on earth.

I never realized just how much the words about the thief and the liar would impact my life. These words would be the moral code I strived to maintain, but they were much more than that. In the process of learning balance between hate and compassion, they became a ticking time bomb waiting to explode.

Church To Church

The darkness around me felt like a low, billowing fog in the midst of obscured moonlight. It was a consuming thickness; hiding everything it covered. And hidden in the heart of the fog was the unknown. It was a darkness that others could not see. Voices around me, laughing and cheerful, often blended together into an overwhelming murmur of indistinguishable words that eventually faded into a low-level hum.

Silence was both comfort and torture. The peaceful moments in seclusion often led to attacks of anxiety. Therefore, silence was best filled with either music or the repetitive beating rhythm of the recorded voice I'd learned to enjoy. A voice whose soft tones leading to shrill commands I worshipped and adored, unaware danger buried deep beneath its screams.

Tossing and turning in the bed, I spent hours in torment. Days, weeks, months went by, without the healing I longed for of body and mind. Meditation and prayer were my medicine, the beating voice was my therapy, and God was my cure. Why was He waiting? Why did the healing never come?

One-by-one, those around me started to fade away. The people I leaned on most, who promised to be with me to the end, began to leave. Was this the end? I began to wish that it were. There was nothing in this life worth living for, only one thing in life worth dying for, and the promise of a new life to come. A new life without

sickness or death, a life no longer burdened with the pain and suffering that had become a way of life.

Cold, steel knives seemed to pierce through my temples in a rhythmic beat. Bright lights would often cut through the pupils, as though looking at a fluorescent light bulb were looking directly at the sun. Hot chills, cold sweat, tossing and turning from a pain that did not exist – all symptoms of a disease I could not explain.

Was I dying? What if it is a brain tumor causing the pain? Are migraine headaches normal? Should the heart feel like it's beating out of the chest cavity without physical activity? I went through many, many questions that had no answer without extensive medical examination. And I was afraid of what that examination might reveal!

Something was wrong. I had to “get over it.” I had to push through, because it is nothing more than a small trial in life. It was a test, but would I pass? I began to examine my life, looking for answers to my pain.

It was not a sudden change in my body. There was a time when life seemed blissful. A time when the bonds between parents and children were strong, a time when friends were many, and when gatherings brought joy. It was a slowly changing process, over the course of many years, each year increasing the level of pain.

Our family was part of a religious movement that raised the curiosity of those around us. It would be very easy to simply tell them, "We're Pentecostal" and change the subject, but my moral code would not allow. We were similar to the Pentecostal movement, but we had additional "truths" that other Pentecostals did not have. We knew divine mysteries and had inside information on the impending destruction of mankind. We knew how it would happen, right down to the world events leading up to Armageddon.

This world was not our home. It was temporary, right down to the four walls that separated us from the outside air. There was one constant in life, and that constant was relocation from city to city or state to state, from one end of the country to the other. Church was an integral part of our lives, and we had the opportunity of being part of several churches that followed our same belief system. They were our brothers and sisters, and combined, we were the "Bride of Christ." "Bride Churches," we would sometimes refer to them, they were the enlightened churches that knew the same mysteries.

But "brothers and sisters" in the normal sense could not describe how close we were to each other. We were more than church family. We loved each other more than a brother and more than a sister. Together, we would survive doomsday, not simply because we believed the

Christian Gospel, but because we knew about
“The Prophet.”

Sermons discussed the life and times of the Prophet. How he lived. How he thought. How he healed. How he could peer into the very heart of your soul, knowing more about your life than you knew yourself! When those eyes stared into yours, they were looking deep into your life. Nothing could be hidden from his gaze.

His sermons were recorded. From 1947 to 1965, we had the Voice of God for our day, just as Jesus Christ was the Voice for his own. The First Coming was written down in the Bible, and told the wonderful story of the Gospel, but the Second Coming was recorded on cassette. And we were part of it, part of the very last minutes of this world, as we knew it.

Some of the churches we attended played these recordings. Some listened to the Prophet’s voice every Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening. Others included Fridays or Saturdays in this schedule. Some chose to hear their own pastors preach Sunday mornings or both Sunday morning and evening. All based their sermons on the words of the Prophet, whether by listening directly to him or restating what he said in new and exciting ways.

But the most excitement was stirred when the “special people” came into the building to give their testimony. These were the people who had a greater insight – not into salvation or life

experiences, but having more insight into the Prophet and his personal life. To hear them tell us more about the Prophet, stories that we could not purchase on cassette, was a special blessing. They gave us a better view into the man that we had grown to love and trust.

Our family was different. We were special, but I didn't fully understand why until I reached my late teens. Each church we visited already seemed to know us. They seemed genuinely interested in hearing about our lives, each and every aspect. They were especially excited to hear tales from my father, as he told stories from his childhood.

My father was one of those blessed enough to have known the Prophet. His father was blessed far beyond words, having walked with the Prophet and enjoyed a strong friendship. How we lived, what we enjoyed, what we abstained from enjoying – all aspects of our lives were interesting to crowds with itching ears.

In the Southern states, men would gather in small groups after church service to discuss what the Prophet said. From the eyes of a child, it was a strange battle of wits. One would start the conversation by quoting a statement of particular interest in the sermon, and the eyes of the men in the group would light up. Another would remind them, "but the Prophet also said," and draw the conversation in a different direction – sometimes the opposition direction.

Watching this amazed me. One day, I too would have the Prophet's words memorized, and my voice would be heard. My voice would have an advantage, because my name is already recognized. We were royalty among the "Bride," and our opinions carried special weight.

The hospitality of the Southern churches is what any would expect. Southern hospitality has a sweet comfort to any that have experienced it. Never was there a need for a hotel when we travelled, "Our home is your home" would often be given to us as a blessing shortly after exiting the church buildings. The churches were relatively small, and many travelled for several miles—sometimes hundreds—to attend. Those who made the journey were often blessed with wonderful meals, good home-cooked fixings by loving hands that prepared it. It was never a chore making the journey to church, even if it was a long one.

Out West, the hospitality was different but just as wonderful. Rather than dinner spreads on picnic tables, the discussions generally made their way to favorite restaurants or cafeterias. Church culture favored this method; Sunday was the day of rest. It was better to refrain from slaving over the oven and serving others, even if those in the restaurant were.

In the heart of the country, the "Mecca" journey as some called it, there was a strange mixture. "Bride" from all parts of the country migrated, bringing with them all sorts of custom. Rather

than congregate in large groups after service, men and women would gather in small groups that felt cold and distant to a Southern man. Though each church was different, and held a different set of customs, beliefs, and values, all had the same thread of similarity flowing through every conversation. To understand and believe the Prophet was to succeed in this life and be prepared to transition to the next.

Life, as I knew it, was good. We were a simple people with black-and-white values, but we were a close people. We were brothers and sisters. I had much to live for, but even more to die for. And I would not hesitate to die for what I believed: that the creator of heavens and of earth had decreed judgment for the world around us, and chosen us to be the victors in the battle of life.

Don't Claim It

Sickness had tied weights to my body. My arms and my feet felt heavy, as if wrapped with thick iron. It was a struggle to find enough energy to move, and I found myself spending more time sitting and even more time sleeping. I was never an athletic person, more inclined towards music or art, but until recent months enjoyed working with my hands. It all seemed foreign to me now, and the thought of labor made the pain even more unbearable.

“Don’t acknowledge your symptoms,” I told myself. “If you claim them, you will stay sick.”

Our family was particularly careful when it came to illness of any sort. We had spent countless hours listening to the Prophet in recordings during his life, listening intently as he went around the nation telling the masses how to keep their healing. It was simple, really: deny your symptoms and claim your healing!

“Bride churches” knew how to heal. While other churches sought after spiritual gifts we felt were of little value, the ability to heal was the sign of God in your presence. Young and old, those with illness must be more like God desires one to become, must believe in the Prophet, and must stay true to the Prophet’s teaching. Only then they could they accept healing.

Sermon after sermon and all across the country, we sat and eagerly listened as ministers of our faith described masses accepting their healing through the Prophet. Each minister had his own

“special” stories of healing that could only be given to us by God. This was so that we would know that He was in our presence before annihilating the earth and everything on it.

One minister loved to tell the story of watching the leg of a small child growing inches in length. When the Prophet touched his leg, what did not grow properly was suddenly corrected. Another fancied the story of the people on crutches and wheelchairs. As they made their way to the platform with the Prophet, the lame could suddenly walk. Some told of cancerous growths that fell to the floor, enlarged heads that shrunk to normal size, and even death releasing its clutches from its victim right there on the platform.

I envied these people. Had I been there with the Prophet, this sickness that plagued my body would have been released immediately. Now, years later, I must claim my healing to be freed. I dreamed of standing there on the platform to feel the power of the Almighty as my body released its pain. I was not there to witness the magnificent power, but had heard many, many stories of how it worked from the ministers and crowds of people that were there.

People came from far and wide, seeking healing for their bodies. Some from opposite ends of the country to be cured, while others from opposite ends just to witness it. People from out of town became fixtures in the meetings, and the true believers came to recognize one another.

The sick would request a card of paper, with instructions to write their names, addresses, and illness on the back of the card. Friendly ushers would welcome you, get to know you, and collect your cards for the service.

Crowds lined the walls of the buildings to get in, and entrance through the doors was like a small funnel trying to accept the grain from a hundred fields. Some came to the meetings with back pain, and could not stand for hours before and during the service. So wheelchairs or even stretchers were offered. The ushers wanted to make certain that everyone who came for healing was given an opportunity to see the Prophet.

The first few rows of the building were filled with small children. During the lengthy sermons, parents could listen intently to the message given from the Prophet without distraction, as the children sat in awe watching the man on the platform. And the children had a special place in the heart of the Prophet, for "such is the kingdom of God." Their ears could hear and eyes could see the power of God as sick were healed. Further back, the adults did not need to watch so intently. It was their job to be in prayer, bowing their heads as the sick made their way to the Healer.

The Prophet could not touch everyone who came for their healing, only the first few. Using his body as a channel for the power of God took

more energy than other humans could handle. Often, he was limited to only a handful of people before his body was carried away. Those fortunate enough to be called by number were given a chance to accept healing.

Prayer cards were printed with a letter and a number. This, explains ministers, was to maintain orderly conduct in the waiting lines, and to keep the sick seated until their turn for healing. As numbers were called, the sick and afflicted made their way down the aisles past the children to the platform. Once there, the Prophet would tell these people the names, addresses, and sicknesses that were written on their cards.

This arrangement was not always the case. Some remember watching people around them being called from their seats. “You with the red checkered sweater on, or the “Lady in the green dress” would be called by the Prophet. He’d ask them if they would believe him to be God’s prophet and accept healing for the diseases on the cards, sometimes even without having given the card to an usher!

The excitement was stirred among the people when a familiar face was called out from the platform. They’ve been coming to the meetings so long for their healing, and finally their time had come!

These were things I’d never see with my own eyes. It was another time and place. But I didn’t need these things. I had access to the same God,

and that God steal healed today. All I need do
was accept it, deny my conditions, and believe.

The Jailer, The Weights, and the Scale

Dorothy Rowe, world-renown psychologist, said that, "Depression is a prison where you are both the suffering prisoner and the cruel jailer.

In the aftermath this becomes apparent, but from the onset this is not obvious. Depression is a scale, filled with a thousand tiny weights. As a weight drops, the force of the drop may move the scale momentarily, but the scale can easily return. Each weight seems trivial, but when combined, forms a mass that is a force to be reckoned with. Over time, it's more and more difficult to "bounce back."

Some weights are environmental. From a stressful workplace to a difficult project, the conditions that surround you affect your outlook. Other weights are hereditary. Chemical makeup or personality traits passed down from generation to generation. There are weights we add ourselves, the times we push ourselves too hard for too long, or the refusal to let our bodies rest or recover. Some weights are added due to our psychological makeup. Our level of emotion, our level of compassion, the level of control of our reactions to situations, can all add additional weights to the scale.

But there are weights that are more difficult to categorize. The times you know something is not quite right, but can't seem to put your finger on any particular reason why. The times you know something is badly wrong, and refuse to admit it.

By the time I realized what was wrong with my body, it was past the time of fixing the situation. There were weights I could remove to lighten the load, but the scale had already fell on the floor. I had gathered weights in all categories big and small, yet only aware of the larger ones.

It was a disease not openly discussed in our family. A deadly disease that had claimed the life of a family member, we seldom mentioned the causes or symptoms. I'm told that the onset of the disease began for me at around age sixteen, and that my reclusive personality was a result of the onset.

It's difficult to say which weight tipped the scale, but it was obvious when my thoughts started to focus upon the fact that something was not quite right within the "Bride."

Having had the opportunity to become acquainted with many churches around the United States that were of "like mind," it was increasingly obvious that one must be very selective as to what, specifically, "like mind" applied to. From doctrinal teachings to future predictions, it seemed that no two churches fully agreed upon anything. In an inverse pyramid of understanding, only the first stone was common among the people: God had sent a prophet. Beyond this understanding, it seemed that his purpose, his "message," his teachings, and his future after death were all up in the air.

Some groups waited eagerly for his return. The groups familiar with his prophecies were very bold in stating that all predictions must be fulfilled – when God speaks through a prophet, His words cannot fail!

Other groups quickly dismissed this, spiritualizing predictions that did not succeed and turning them into vague, loose interpretations. They were fulfilled in the spiritual realm, not in the physical, and they were not for our eyes to see.

Some groups claimed new interpretations of these prophecies, claiming that their “new revelation” was the answer to all questions. New leaders emerged with these revelations, being hoisted into power by men and women who believed them to be God sent.

There were the fringe groups, those who anointed new prophets to produce new messages from God to a lost and dying world. These men would often travel from church to church, looking to attract new followers by luring them away from their friends and family.

Our prophet predicted that the world would end before 1977. In the years leading up to this time, books were written and sold, missionaries travelled the world to proclaim the coming judgment, and newspaper advertisements were printed to announce God’s wrath upon mankind. But our Prophet died tragically in 1965, and the true interpretation of the prophecies leading up

to doomsday was uncertain. So each leader had the difficult task of interpreting and understanding what, exactly, went wrong.

Many sermons around the nation had the same intentions but with different details. Pastors were telling their congregations what they must do to prepare themselves for God's wrath, and how they must conduct themselves in order to avoid it. The checklist of things that we, as Bride, were to abstain from differed greatly from town to town.

To a stationary family, this would be an easy task. Each pastor seemed to have his own checklist prepared, and each Sunday the items in the list were embedded in the back of our minds with hot embers of hell fire surrounding them. A stationary family would have a small subset of the global checklist, only having those items that the Pastor understood as required by God to produce rapturing faith.

But to a nomad family like my own, these lists were difficult to maintain. To one group, certain pleasures of life were acceptable whereas other groups condemned those same freedoms. While one family might enjoy their favorite pastime, another family would speak very harshly against it. And they would do so at the will of their pastors, who gave them clear instructions as to how to live their personal lives. To a nomad family who believed in the impending destruction of mankind, one is forced to combine all lists. If you knew that a violent death was

certain, would you not do everything within your power to avoid it?

Over time, these checklists became weights on the scale. Impossible to maintain, difficult to manage, painful to endure, and fearful to reject, these lists became part of the cell walls that became my prison. A jail cell that I created for myself, imprisoned myself, and remained inside as both the convicted and the jailer.

By themselves, these weights would have never tipped my scales. But combined with the others, these weights were more than I could balance. This prison that I called "blessing" was starting to overturn.

The Melting Pot

A pilgrimage in any religion is a journey made for self-examination, devotion, and to find purity. For a Muslim to see Mecca, the birthplace of Mohammed, there is no greater joy. Jews have made pilgrimage to the Wailing Wall since the 4th century. Buddhists travel to Lumbini to see the birthplace of Gautama Buddha, and Hindus travel to over fifty sites spread throughout India.

The final destination for our nomadic family was the Mecca of our religion. It was not the birthplace of the Prophet, but was a place just as sacred: his temple. The tabernacle sat in a small town in Southern Indiana that was connected by four bridges to Louisville, Kentucky. A city of less than 50,000 people, Jeffersonville seems barely equipped to accommodate those making a pilgrimage for a religion of between two and four million people.

The influx of visitors does not occur at any of the dates most obvious. It is not the Prophet's birthdate that attracts the visitors, or the month that the tabernacle was built. It is not the month his family moved to Indiana, or any other date associated with his life. Though loosely connected, it is not even the date of his death that attracts the crowds. Instead, the journey is typically made for a date that conveniently changed focus.

When the Prophet died, his body was held from the grave for several months. His death being in December 24, 1965 and his body being buried April 12, 1966, the "journey to Mecca" was

conveniently positioned at Easter. April 10th 1966 provided the Easter services that became tradition, and two days later the body was buried.

Many of his followers came to pray for his immediate resurrection, and local newspapers printed stories describing the rumors around the city that people were coming from around the nation to witness the “rebirth.” Even the Jeffersonville pastor believed that a resurrection was imminent, and told reporters that his faith in a rebirth was based on a “halo above [the Prophet’s] head when he was born.” The story was so popular that it was promoted through the United Press International, a world news organization that had multiple avenues of publication. The world was watching, at Easter, as a group of religious followers looked for their prophet to open his casket and step out of his grave.

But for the next fifty years, this resurrection never occurred. Crowds initially made their pilgrimage to witness the Prophet’s return, but over time, realized that this was improbable. Instead, and since the date was conveniently positioned next to Easter, transitioned their focus from the dead body in the ground to the Christian date of celebration. Instead of a mournful journey of death, it became a happy journey of life.

Our family made these pilgrimages whenever possible, and it was a wonderful time. The

people were warm and inviting, and many would congregate in homes or buildings around the area to give testimony to the life and times of the Prophet. Children would laugh and play while adults shared personal stories about the Prophet, and it was a great time to spend with brothers and sisters that we considered family.

Some, faithful to tradition, made the journey to seek healing. The Prophet no longer alive, the prayer cards no longer issued to the afflicted, and the healing no longer magnificent, people did not come seeking immediate healing. Instead, they sought comfort for their pain and prayer for their medication to cure their disease. A select few made their journey seeking healing with incurable disease or crippled bones, hearing stories of a prophet who could have repaired their bodies. But that gift was seldom manifested in the church. Though it was the gift used to proclaim vindication of the Prophet, this evidence of the Holy Ghost in our religion seemed all but nonexistent in these days.

After several years, the city became a “melting pot” for the variety of belief systems within the following. All came bringing checklists of their requirement to produce rapturing faith, but without the unity that is found in each of the various churches. Now, one did not need travel from state to state in order to witness a different checklist; travelling from household to household in Mecca would give one opportunity to build a lengthy set of rules.

But during a pilgrimage, when the crowd is warm and inviting, one does not notice the subtle differences in doctrine. Many mistake the hospitality and warm Easter feelings for the way of life in Mecca. Some are so attracted to it that they rip their families away from their home to relocate. My family was no exception, and for this reason, chose this city of Jeffersonville as our next destination.

I will never forget the words of advice from a friend when we first moved to Jeffersonville. "If you are coming to Jeffersonville expecting unity and bliss, you will be sadly disappointed."

At the time, I tossed it aside to forget about it. How could this place be anything but bliss? How could a people, of like minds and like faith, not enjoy walking where the Prophet walked? How could we not enjoy sitting in his temple, hearing his recorded voice, and feasting our minds upon his words?

But it was very evident that the hospitality we enjoyed during the pilgrimage was not the same hospitality we received as locals. It was evident that the unity we expected was filled with division, and the peace we longed for was not to be found.

Services within the temple were filled with divided parishioners. Those who still looked for the resurrection of the prophet sat on one side of the building, while those who looked for the prophet's son to be endued with power sat on

the other. Guests sat scattered throughout the building, unaware of any segregation. After services, each group exited the building through opposite doors and segregated into even smaller groups. All believed that the Prophet was God's final voice before destruction, but there were very few that fully agreed upon how to avoid it.

This never really bothered me. Our family had special instructions by the Prophet, and a special favor granted to us in the eyes of God. "All your children and your grandchildren will be saved," proclaimed the Prophet. "No matter what you do, be there!"

We had special instructions to "be there." And we had a panoramic mental image of where "there" was. It was a confusing place, torn by war and unknown evil. Russia would soon invade, raping our women and killing our children. Automobiles would be dramatically changed in design from the aerodynamic and functional style of today to that of an egg. A woman would be president, elected only because other women were favoring the female candidate. Los Angeles would be at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, and the world economy in complete failure. The only answer to world commerce would be the Catholic Church using their wealth to stabilize the financial systems.

During this time, the world would suddenly watch as the Prophet travelled the world in an airplane to pitch his tent in cities around the globe. News reporters would stand at the

entrance, watching as the sick and afflicted entered the tent and returned completely well. In one corner of the tent was a little room, and the Bride would enter the room to receive their new bodies. These bodies would be endued with power as the Prophet took our hands, and we would prepare to walk upon the ashes of those who did not believe the Prophet. We had one simple requirement: to be there.

Meltdown

They say that some of the best composers and songwriters struggle with deep depression. As the body tries to find ways to release its pain, the mind uses artistic abilities to release its emotion. Ludwig van Beethoven suffered through severe depression, which often led him to contemplate suicide. Over time, the depression is thought to have combined with bipolar disorder, a combination of severe depression and extreme happiness. His mind was literally playing tug-of-war with itself as it produced symphonies that would immortalize him.

At the climax of my pain, these symptoms became familiar. The depressive state had removed all motivation in life. A perfectionist by nature, I found myself quickly becoming passive and even unaware of the condition of my surroundings. I sat on a fence, looking high above life itself. On the one side was my life and all I had to live for, while on the other side was release through death.

I would never call myself suicidal. I never held a rifle in my hands to peer down the barrel, or sat with a strong medication for hours trying to convince myself of the easier path. I had much to live for, with a very happy home. My family was “royalty” in our circles, and I was above those actions. Or so I’d like to tell myself.

Looking back, I was strong, but not strong on my own. At the climax of my depression, a cousin had called me to say hello. And during the course of the conversation, he could sense that

something was not right. I barely remember the phone conversation, but it was enough that his concern for me was strong. He continued to call me, every day, to give me encouragement and strength.

Our conversations were not long, sometimes only minutes. And our conversations were not always two-directional. Often, he would call and I would listen as he talked about anything and everything in his attempt to boost my spirits. His voice became soothing to my ears, and I looked forward to his daily calls.

It was ironic to me, even during the conversations. My cousin did not believe in the Prophet, and had long since decided not to associate with the brothers and sisters. A bit ostracized by his home church, he was both a cowboy and a renegade. He lived by a black-and-white code of conduct similar to my own, but with different morals that he called "the cowboy way." In his version of truth, rules were simple: "Love God, the One who created this beautiful world that we live in. And love your neighbors that aren't trying to kill you."

I remember thinking that though his words ring with truth, it's missing one significant aspect: belief in the Prophet! But I was in pain, severe pain, and he was a comfort when I needed it most. I never mentioned my thoughts to him, never wanting to do anything to jeopardize the situation. I was desperate for help, and I didn't even know what "help," meant. All I knew was

that having another person give me encouragement to keep going was healing in of itself. And over time, I began to realize that it was his voice that was keeping me alive.

We sometimes spoke of religion, but limited to his personal thoughts. His black-and-white personality couldn't accept double standards, and his experiences with the Bride churches in his state were less than pleasant. I learned why he left, wondered where he went, and never risked asking.

It was during this time that life began to change. Relationships that I worked hard to maintain were suddenly put on hold. Work was impossible, bedridden for hours at a time during the day. Tormented by the throbbing pain in my head, plagued by the fact that healing had not come, still believing that I had done everything necessary to claim and accept my cure.

Long time friendships began to crumble. Without my working to maintain them, they all but disappeared. Family seemed to have forgotten me. Close relatives, distant relatives, even immediate family became strangers. At the worst of it, I was leaning heavily on less than a handful of people – only this cousin, my brother, and my wife for support.

Months went by without contact. I thought about the people in the temple, confused about my current condition. On the one hand, I was a bit shocked that not a single person questioned

where I was or what happened to me. What if instead, I had injured myself and needed help? Would any come to my rescue? What if I had been kidnapped? Would any search to find me? The thoughts that went through my head created an endless cycle of depression that would not lift – slightly relieved by the continual call of my cousin. Had he not lived over eight hours travel, I would have begged him to visit.

I was more confused by my pastor. Also my grandfather, I expected some concern for my well-being. He knew of my condition, but appeared to be even more distant after learning about it. Thoughts ran through my mind about a shepherd and his flock, and my emotions were difficult to control. Where is the shepherd that is supposed to leave his sheepfold for that one lost sheep?

The Prophet's sons, the elders, and the lay members – each and every person in the temple seemed to have forgotten me. I started to realize that the only tie that bound all relationships was the effort that I put into keeping them.

But I was unwavering in my faith. I believed in the Prophet and looked forward to the tent. I longed for the little room in the tent, when this failing body would be replaced with a new one. I knew that I would “be there” even in my present state – nothing could keep me from salvation and my eternal destination. I believed that I had the correct set of rules from the checklists that I had gathered, believed that I had followed them the

best that I could, and believed that I had also held to the Christian faith requirements that were combined with my own esoteric knowledge. My bags all packed, I was waiting and ready to go.

It was about this time that my songwriting exploded. A musician and a songwriter at an early age, new songs were a common occurrence. But not at the rate in which these came – they were an onslaught of songs. Morning, noon, and night I had tunes ringing through my head—complete with words—so fast that I could not write them all down. Some I did write, others I wish I had written. All songs were about religion, but not about the Prophet. All songs were about different subjects but all with the same theme. All songs were about double standards.

“Jesus did not come to save the saved – he came to save the lost.” The most powerful song I had ever written came to me in the depths of depression. The people in the temple enjoyed listening to hellfire and brimstone raining down upon the heads of the lost, and our victorious celebration walking upon their ashes afterward. Yet very few (if any) made any attempt towards decreasing the number of ashes. Local visitors to the temple were almost non-existent, and usually visitors were believers in the Prophet from other cities. The church did not hold vigils for the dying world around them, but instead rejoiced at the impending destruction of mankind. If their primary concern were to be saving the lost,

would not the pastors be doing everything within their power to reach them?

Songs came to me about the multiple pathways people take in their journey, all towards the same destination. Rather than divisions along the way, shouldn't we be supporting each other and helping each other reach the same destination? Other songs about compassion for the needy, money for the poor, salvation to a lost and dying world, I was suddenly filled with music, but in too much pain to do anything with it.

The Question

There are certain things in life that are simply unforgettable. As a child, these things are embedded into our memories, and as an adult we cherish them. An autograph with a ball player, a signed T-shirt from a musician, some memories also come with memorabilia. My childhood memories are very few and far between, but the ones with memorabilia seem to last indefinitely.

From age fourteen to age 35, I had an autograph hanging on my wall, but not of a ballplayer or musician. Signed in his own handwriting, the Prophet's son had sent me a letter with his blessings for my music ministry. Ironic now that I think about it, the same music ministry that began to open my eyes was blessed by the son of the men that had closed them. The Prophet's oldest son was close and dear to our family, but the Prophet's youngest son was my father's childhood best friend. The brothers were well respected by all, especially by our nomadic family. When I received his letter, there was no question as to what to do with it; this letter would be kept and cherished forever.

At one point in my childhood, my father helped organize a tiny church in a small town in Kansas. It was a handful of people, some from just across the border in Missouri and some in the neighboring city in Kansas, all gathering in a building and paying rent through collected offering. We would sit and listen eagerly to the Prophet's voice through recorded cassette tapes, sing songs in honor of Jesus Christ and our

Prophet, and fellowship around the testimonies of those who believed.

It was during this time that I first remember meeting the Prophet's son. I'm sure that I had met him countless times before, but it was the first memory of his significance to our religion. My father invited him to speak, and he came assuming a very small crowd. But my father ran a newspaper advertisement in the local news that headlined, "SON OF A PROPHET."

Looking back, this likely had an impact on the types of stories told in the testimony. Not because they differed from city to city – the rehearsed testimony included many of the same tales in each retelling. But by inviting those who did not believe, it must have significantly limited which stories to tell and which stories to keep secret. Knowing what I know now, I can only imagine how careful he must have been, cautious not to say anything that would excite the news media.

Nevertheless, the son of the Prophet came, the testimony was given, and the people were filled with an inside view of the life and times of the man we worshipped and adored. Also looking back, and with vague memory, I am not certain that my favorite story was told to a public crowd. God's wrath was coming, and we were about to witness destruction and chaos. Nobody could make the crowds cheer for it like the Prophet's oldest child. It was not until years later in a tiny church atop the Ozark Mountains that I first

remember hearing of the destruction of Los Angeles during one of his testimonies. The Prophet's son would grin from ear to ear, telling us the tale, how his father stopped suddenly in the street as the vision struck. As a child, you could almost imagine his hands outstretched, his eyes rolling back in their sockets, and his mouth wide open as the vision hit. The Prophet's son would get real quiet as he retold the most important part. His daddy's words resounding in his ear to this day, "Son, you won't be an old man before sharks are swimming right where you stand."

We sat in awe, listening to the Prophet tale. He followed it up with a smile as he shook his head back and forth furiously. "And I'm not an old man yet, 'cause California is still standing!" The applause from the audience was enough to shatter glass, and somebody started clapping. Before long, the entire building was celebrating the coming destruction of millions of people when Los Angeles met its doom.

I was waiting for my cousin's call when this memory surfaced. It was at a time when my pain was severe, and I lay prostrate struggling to contain my tears. Anxiety had taken over my muscles, and a cold sweat covered my body. Wrenching around in the bed, I tried to fight off what I thought were "demons" in my head.

"Why is he so old when California is still standing?"

I couldn't shake the question. I tried. It was blasphemous to think such things. To question a prophet was to question life! To allow a question to form in your mind was to let demons take control of your soul! Why was this happening to me? Why could I not simply let it go?

But I couldn't, no matter how hard I tried. The question kept surfacing, along with several others attached to it. Why would God choose to destroy a million lives without giving them the opportunity to repent? Did anyone in the city of Los Angeles remember the warning they received in 1965? What about small children, innocent, who never heard about the Prophet? What if they never had a chance to be saved?

I felt great sadness. Not just for the children, but for all the people of the city. Why did I rejoice at the deaths of thousands? Was I so evil that I cared more about being right than I did about the slaughter of innocence? They were questions I could not shake. But the first, the original question, had no answer. At seventy-eight years old, the Prophet's son was certainly an old man.

This question nagged at me for days. Every single time I walked past the signature, I was reminded of the man who signed it and what he told us. I found myself staring at the signature, as if some explanation would form in the blue ink that had been scribbled on the tan paper. I read through the letter, for the first time in several years, suddenly realizing that it was no personal letter - it was a form letter with generic

responses. Only a small paragraph applied to my music ministry, and the other paragraphs could be applied to any response to any person. I had received the "Ovaltine letter" from "A Christmas Story" - a letter that told me to "drink more Ovaltine." ...only this wasn't Ovaltine, this was the Prophet!

What to do? Why had I not seen this before? What did this all mean? It was too much for me to process, and I went back to bed.

Old Camp Meeting

I sat this question aside for several weeks. The climax of my depression was behind me, a life of depression still lay in front of me, and I found myself trying to learn how to function while clinically depressed.

Somehow I had gathered enough courage to see a medical doctor and describe my symptoms. It did not take much description before they were fully aware of what was happening to my body, and they told me for the first time what depression was and how it worked. They were very helpful in explaining the chemistry of it all, the short-term effects, and what I could expect long-term. They were not present to diagnose the climax, but from my descriptions agreed that I had suffered through what used to be called a “nervous breakdown.” And was very fortunate, because in most cases, the patient is no longer able to function until the disorder is resolved. Medication and therapy were the only answer in the medical world, and my church world had failed me.

According to the first and second doctor’s opinion, this disease would be my life. I would require medication indefinitely, would likely require therapy to determine the best treatments, and could expect a lifetime of adjustments. These adjustments included changes in medication, but more concerning were the possibilities of a change in career path and lifestyle change. This was not something I wanted, and not something I felt that I needed.

The world was ending soon, and I would not be here long enough to change anything.

Taking the medication was a mountain of fear to overcome. Not only was medicine a direct violation of my faith, it was one of those “mind altering” drugs I had been warned about. Before the height of my depression, I had discussions with a “Bride” pastor across the river in Louisville Kentucky, and his warning still rang in my ears: “I’ve seen it time and again. People take that depression medication, and a demon comes on them! Before long, the leave this Message!”

The “Message” was another name for “Bride” churches. There were several names we called ourselves, from the “Evening Light” to the “Bride” to the “Message of the Hour.” Those who disrespected us called us “Branhamites,” and those who disrespected our particular flavor—even from within the religion—called us “Tape Worms.”

His warning rang in my ears, but now with several questions. I was no medical doctor, but I understood the science of the medication. The body’s self-produced chemical that calms the nerves and induces sleep, serotonin, was deficient. The medication simply caused the body to continue producing that which it already should have been. Did people really leave “The Message” when their mind was at peace? Did removing mental illness cause one to wake up from something? What did they wake up FROM?

At the time, I discounted it and tried to forget about it. We had spent about six months visiting this pastor's church, and they were a special kind of different. Refusing to fellowship and even speaking negatively against my grandfather's church, the people appeared to be proud of their seclusion and separation. In fact, we continued visiting until the pastor preached a sermon specifically on separation, using his own family as an example. "My family wonders why I won't have anything to do with them. I tell them that they don't believe the Message! If they'd follow the Prophet, I would start hanging around them!"

I knew this was not right. The church was fresh and exciting to us, having spent the last several years listening mostly to recordings from 1947 to 1965. But this, I could not sit through. Any church that promotes abandoning family has lost their way. Why NOT hang around them? Why not strive to do everything you can possibly do to save them?

It was about that time that I realized that I needed a fresh new experience in general. Living in the "Melting Pot" of this religion, it is very easy to become disenchanted. A blend of all sorts of doctrine sitting in the pews while listening to recorded sermons does nothing to correct the situation. How can a shepherd guide his sheep when he chooses to play recordings from a different era?

I wanted something that would re-ignite my fire, something that would bring new excitement about the Prophet and his Message. And the obvious choice was a trip down South for Labor Day meetings. "Camp meeting time," some called it, a time when churches from all over gathered to fellowship around the Prophet.

There'd be singing, preaching, sports and games for the children, testimonies about the Prophet, and many other ways to kindle the fire. I liked the music in particular, being a musician myself, and realized the importance of music in worship. Praise and worship prepares the people for receiving, and brings the heart to a warm place ready to be filled. And this was some of the best music in the country! Afterward, they sell CDs around the country, and I absolutely loved my copies from the years past.

And it was a pleasant drive. It was nearby a city that I called "my hometown," deep in the heart of Georgia. No matter how often our family moved, and no matter where we ended up, this would be my home. I'd made the trip several times a year for as long as I could remember, visiting family and friends from my childhood. It was a special place for me, and I knew that would also help in rekindling my fire.

I remember the excitement as I walked in the entryway to the building that held the sanctuary. Looking around, I looked for new changes and renovations to the building, amazed at how it had grown over the years. It was not that long

ago that I remembered the same group of people, or at least a smaller subset of them, gathering in a mobile home that sat in an open field. In those days, the music was good, but musicians were scarce. My family would join in the playing and singing to help out, and I started chuckling when I remembered that one of them stopped suddenly. He got a little excited one time while playing the bass guitar, and was never asked to play again.

I also remembered the time that an assistant pastor at the Temple visited the mobile home church and got a little carried away with his preaching. Hours and hours went by, until one of the men sitting in the chair in front of me stood up, raised his arm, and started tapping his watch angrily. The sermon ended about as abruptly as a freight train on a track with a missing bridge.

We sat down in the pew, and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves through the first part of the service. The benches were very comfortable, making it easier to settle in for what we knew would be a long service. And we were glad that it was – we came a long distance to worship!

When the sermon started, I was particularly eager to hear the speech. A pastor from a church in Canada was preaching, and his down-to-earth style was very fun to listen to. He was both entertaining and brutally honest in his wording, making you enjoy the correction that he convinced you that you needed. We were getting a good “spanking,” but from a rod dipped in

chocolate icing. It made you want to lick your wounds.

But my son did not enjoy sitting on the bench as much as my wife and I were. Restless and fidgeting, he started squirming around enough to cause a commotion. Under normal circumstances, this would have bothered me, wanting to hear the sermon from the sanctuary, but I got a little too excited for a fresh, new experience. In the temple back home, it was customary for the women to take the child out of the sanctuary – usually for the purpose of taking them to the bathroom and beating the living fire out of their backside. At any point during temple service, if one needed to use the restroom, you could count on a child screaming for their dear lives. This church was not that way. I'd been told that the elders respected the fact that children were not adults, and did not enjoy sitting still for hours on end. And also respected the fact that mothers might enjoy service, just as the men. So there were rooms in the basement that men could bring their children to “get the wiggles out.” I headed down.

From the contrast of the visions of torture chambers where women beat children back home in the temple, this was awe-inspiring. As I entered the room, there were plush, reclining leather couches. A brand-new flat-screen, big screen HDTV hung on the wall with a live feed from the service. The room was absolutely FILLED with toys of all sorts – from Lego to books to action figures and more. This was a

child's dream, and a father's hideaway! It was the perfect man cave, right in the bottom of the church! I did not need to tell my son what to do. Instantly, when he found the toys on the floor, his little motor started spinning. Before I could count to even two, all toys on the floor seemed to come into motion at the exact same time, while I myself settled in for a comfortable view of the service.

It was an experience that on the trip home, I wished that I could forget. This was the same sermon that I was thoroughly enjoying topside, but watching through the television downside. It was a beautifully constructed sermon discussing "legalism in the Message," the idea that people were so focused on living by rules that they had forgotten the true meaning of the Prophet's words. A theme that I positively agreed with, having experienced so many different flavors of those rules, and whole-heartedly disagreed with the invention of new ones throughout the gatherings I'd been part of.

In my opinion at that time, however, there was a fundamental element of legalism that was required to follow the Prophet. The rules that he set in place, as he described them, were a foundation to the Message itself. To ignore them was to deny the Prophet, to keep them was to honor the Prophet, and to change them was to twist the Prophet's words. But to add new rules to the mix seemed senseless to me. To unnecessarily adhere to new interpretations of the Prophets words was to place salvation upon

your own shoulders and take it further away from the Prophet. What would he say, when he met us in the room on the tent, if we felt we had a better way? I started to realize that legalism was any rules that differed from the Prophet's set of rules.

It wasn't the subject matter of the sermon that bothered me. Watching a "Bride" service through the television was a new experience, one that I could only compare to the Sunday morning televangelists as they worked the crowds. It was a concept we were all familiar with, one that was often discussed in our testimony gatherings. Our Prophet was an evangelist, but he was not like the others. While the others, preyed upon the emotion of the people, ours brought the word of the Almighty!

But what I saw through the television in the basement of this church was much the same as I'd noticed in the largely publicized moneymakers. A story was told. It was a heart-warming story, one that touched the listener's emotions and prepared them to listen. It built to a loud, fast-paced rhythm of teaching, like the beating of an African drum. You could feel your heart beat with the voice, each word captivating as it flowed through your senses. And then silence. A whisper. A quiet phrase. A buildup of curiosity as you wondered what was coming. Then BAM! An explosion of words, like the eruption of a volcano.

The crowd was like putty, fully formed by the hands of the man behind the pulpit. Screaming, shouting, waving hands, you'd have thought that any minute would bring a voice in tongues or feet dancing in the spirit! He would inject topics into the rhythm that I knew for certain others disagreed with, and yet shouts, "Amen" would ring through the rafters. Quite literally, the man could have told them that Burger King was the Lord's hamburger, and they'd have cheered him on.

I realized very quickly that something was wrong. We were the audience in the televangelist camera. We were the group of people that could be coaxed into anything. We were the pawns in the hands of the chess masters, willingly accepting our place on the board, even if it meant certain death.

Mountains of Fear

Plato said that “We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.” The power of this statement by the Greek philosopher is beyond understanding until you experience such fear for yourself.

I will never forget the overwhelming sense of fear as I picked up my smartphone. It was as though I were a small child, armed with nothing but my hands, making my way towards a mountain filled with fierce animals, angry warriors, and perilous slopes on narrow pathways. With the simple motion of my hand, I was pushing myself towards a mountain of fear, a mountain that I was not certain I was ready to conquer.

The hidden truths that we believed were not accepted by this world, or so we were told with each sermon that detailed these “mysteries.” In the world we lived, there were only two bloodlines – the pure and the evil. Those from the pure bloodline would accept our hidden truths when they heard them, but those who were of the other bloodline would reject them. And our truths were not difficult to see and understand. “Even a fool should believe it,” we were told, with examples of the Prophet’s supernatural experiences as plain as the nose on your face. Even the newspapers printed the awesome signs of our Prophet! Thousands witnessed, hundreds confirmed, newspapers and magazines printed, and the United States government documented them!

I was aware that an abundance of negative information would be published on the Internet about our Prophet. I knew that those that were not from the pure bloodline would throw anything and everything they could in the way of truth. Could I lose my salvation if I looked at what they had to say? What if I accidentally crossed the line between life and death?

The first time I executed an Internet search to find information about our Prophet, I was not very successful. The search engine was successful, obviously, listing the best suggestions for my query. At the very top, in inviting terms, was the link to the home page for the publication company operated by the Prophet's two sons. I knew the site well, having spent time reading through their content before and visiting their facilities on multiple occasions.

I did not know for sure what I was looking for, but I knew for sure that I would not find it on the organization's website. I felt as though I were looking inside a box, all sides hiding a secret, through the same point of view that hundreds had used for their own understanding. I wanted another point of view, even if it challenged my way of thinking. I had no doubt that our Prophet was a true prophet of God. But I felt as though churches around the nation had gone their own directions, holding a simple truth and over-complicating it.

I decided that a safe second choice would be to review Wikipedia. Sure, the information on Wikipedia could not always be trusted, but generally speaking most pages were unbiased and contained the basic facts. Reading through the site, I was surprised to find that it matched what I myself believed. In fact, it was so positive that it appeared to be promoting our Prophet!

I read through the Wikipedia article multiple times, and on multiple days. Concerned that I must have been mistaken in my thinking, I wanted to re-read the article with fresh eyes on a new day. But each time that I read it, it was very obvious that someone who believed the Prophet had written the article. I clicked on the "View History" tab, and began to realize that there were "squatters" sitting on the site to view any change made to the content. These changes, if they disagreed with our beliefs, were deleted, re-written, or blocked. This page was definitely not going to be helpful.

My search became difficult. As I went down the list of websites in my search, it was very easy to find sites that were using the Internet as a mission field to spread our belief system, but very few critiques or commentaries. The first page of search results contained publishing companies, missionaries, churches, and even a link to a "God's Generals" television program. I knew that a generic search was not going to provide any helpful results. Instead, I needed to look at specific topics.

My first topic of choice was a cloud of mystery. Literally, this was a cloud that formed above the skies of Arizona that the government declared to be a “mystery” in 1963. This cloud, according to our Prophet, was formed when seven of God’s angels broke through the skies after giving him the divine revelation of the Seven Seals – the same Seven Seals from the Bible’s Revelation of John, but with even greater detail.

This search brought a new set of results, and suddenly I found myself engaged in reading through hours and hours of debate on a subject that I knew very well. I found myself engaged in the conversation, as though I myself were speaking, and giving the same answers as all the users who were defending our Prophet.

The more I read through the discussion, the more my faith was solidified. I could feel the emotions from both sides of the argument, even more so as the argument got heated, but came to the conclusion that those against our Prophet were clearly argumentative simply for the sake of causing confusion. Those speaking on behalf of our faith were also argumentative, but it was a defense of the religion as a whole. They were angered, but it was a “righteous anger”.

But then it hit me, like a load of bricks dropped from the Eiffel Tower. My jaw dropped, my heart stopped, and I had difficulty finding my breath. “But he was not there!” exclaimed the user, and gave specific details, some of which included the Prophet’s own words! They even referenced a

publication, printed by the Prophet's own daughter, trying to explain how that he could be standing underneath the cloud when he was in another state.

Before the Labor Day vacation was over, I found myself captivated, reading through the website and its many discussion threads like I had just stumbled on King Solomon's mine carrying two empty buckets. There were trivial issues, some that I questioned why I wasted my time reading. There were questionable issues, the kind that could be argued either way depending upon your personal bias. There were major issues, issues that pulled away large chunks of the foundation of the religion itself. And there were undeniable issues – facts all presented and documented, out in the public for all to see.

And through the majority of my reading, I continued searching in complete silence and anonymity. I still believed in our Prophet, still believed we were in the only religion with truth, and still would have gladly stepped into a firing line to defend the Message. I was stronger in my faith than most, and knew that I could read the good, the bad, and the ugly without wavering in faith. But I wanted to protect my family from acquiring this information – they would never understand looking through another viewpoint to expand our knowledge of truth. Nor did I want them to suffer through the treacherous road leading up the mountain of fear.

But during the course of the week, I found a book recently written, that discussed the “mystery cloud” in full detail. Where we’d been told that the government’s report declared it “mystery,” this book included the secondary report that demystified it. Where we’d been told the event happened during a hunting trip, this book included the dates of hunting season, making that either illegal or impossible. Every single aspect of the story, as we understood it, was overturned. After reviewing the information, reading the book more than once, I could hold it in no longer. “Did you know that the Prophet was not there when ‘the cloud’ happened?” I asked my wife.

I knew that she did not. I knew the answer she’d give me, I knew the look she’d give me, I knew the crying that would follow, and I knew the awkward conversations that would come. But I had to tell someone! Who could I tell? I could not hold this in.

Through Thick And Thin

Euripides, famous Greek playwright of tragedies said, "One loyal friend is worth ten thousand relatives."

To any who has ever been a friend in need, these are words to live by. The next chapter of my life would certainly make a wonderful tragedy, one that could be included with his other ninety-five plays, but one that very few could understand without having been part of the Message. But the problem with Euripides friends versus relatives statement was that in my case, my best friends WERE relatives.

As my body struggled to adjust to the balance between depression and medication, I found myself ignoring the new information I'd stumbled upon. It wasn't that I was afraid; there should be no fear in examining what we believe. I'd already conquered the mountains of fear, and came through with a strong faith. It was definitely a different and repositioned faith, now knowing that other views into the religion had conflicting information, but it was faith nonetheless.

For the first time in several weeks, I had strength to work, most of the time enduring a full eight-hour day. It was easier to focus my energy without focusing on negativity of any sort. My priorities lie with God and family, and providing for my family was far more important than examining the questions I had uncovered.

It had been quite some time since I'd been to the temple. Over the past several months I'd tried only a handful of times, each time forced to leave before service ended. The depression was stronger than my willpower to sit through hours of sermon while suppressing tears. Still unable to maintain friendships, most of my friends started to feel distant or forgotten. Only a handful of people had even contacted me—mostly relatives—and their conversations seemed superficial. None of them even seemed to notice that I was struggling. Even my best friend (also my relative) had not been aware of my suffering. Our friendship was starting to feel distant. Close friends were becoming acquaintances, and others just “somebody that I used to know.” I made a conscious effort to push myself, to work at maintaining relationships, but limited to what I felt capable of managing. The most logical group were those who had reached out to me within the last six months. I took mental inventory, and felt a sense of encouragement as I decided to start over with a smaller batch of people.

But the harder I tried not to think about what I'd discovered, the more difficult it became. I'd find myself visualizing the information in my mind while travelling down the road in silence, or mentally place the information on the ceiling categorically, as I lie awake at night. Each time I heard the Prophet's voice, I thought about his descriptions of these events, and suddenly he sounded like the televangelists I'd witnessed in the past. He was a salesman, a very good one, in

the business of selling what I was certain to be salvation. But I was coming to understand that his version of salvation included fiction to build the emotion of the crowd – just as the televangelists did. It started to feel like a lousy sales pitch from a used car salesman. You could see the rust from the outside.

Still, I continued in secret, even from my wife. Disenchantment is a painful disease, and I did not want her to catch it. But I needed somebody to talk to, somebody that still believed and understood. My cousin still called me often, though no longer daily. As I slowly began to heal, he began to recognize my recovery. It would be comforting to discuss with him, but he was no longer a believer. I needed someone who was both strong in the faith and capable of discussing with an open mind. So I approached my best friend.

It took me a while to gather the courage to bring it up, but after a few dry conversations about business and weather, I broke silence with, “Did you know that the Prophet was not there when the cloud happened?”

I was expecting a similar reaction to my wife’s look of horror, but instead watched a calm set of eyes under a raised set of eyebrows and a half-smile as his voice replied, “What cloud?”

In my mind, on the way to our lunch, I had played out all of the possible scenarios. Each response he could have given, I had a calming

reply, assuring him that I still believe the Prophet, but was re-examining my viewpoint to match all the facts. It was like a “choose your own adventure” story, and I had chosen every one of them in my mind and had a strategy in place to answer his questions intelligently.

But this was a response that I had not expected, a response that I had not planned for. So I found myself having to explain to him what he was *supposed* to believe so that I could then explain to him why he was *not supposed* to believe it in the way we were told. Suddenly, this became more difficult than I had imagined, and I realized that this was the first time I had tried to talk through the entire scenario. And it was painful – I could not force myself to talk through something that I knew to be wrong. The further I dug into the story, the more I realized that I could not dig myself out.

So I abruptly stopped, gathered myself, and started over. “What if suddenly, unaware it was happening, you took the red pill?”

“You mean from the Matrix?” he asked?

I began to tell him everything, unloading far more than I initially wanted to. Everything from the stories we were told as children to the complex doctrines that were built upon them. All unraveled simply by stumbling upon a book that I found through a website, written by a man that I did not know. The more I rambled on, the more inside me came unraveled with this one

single piece of information. He could see that I was upset, and encouraged me with assurance that whatever the outcome, he was a friend through thick and thin.

Undercover Agents

After that meeting and during the weeks from our Labor Day trip to Christmas, I found myself digging deeper and deeper into examination of what I believed. There were more books, written by men who seemed very passionate about their opinion. One man in particular had devoted his life towards researching and writing about the Prophet, with the sole purpose of “helping” people out of the following – especially those that he had “helped” in.

I found myself compiling lists of statements the Prophet made on various subjects that were troubling to me, aware that I could not trust anybody who disagreed. Instead of secondhand information, I needed to go directly back to the source. This was extremely easy, since we had purchased the products sold by his sons, any subject could easily be examined simply by searching for it through software. We could hear the Prophet’s very own voice, while examining his words.

It was during one of these times, unaware that eyes were watching, that I was suddenly startled by a gasp. Alone in the quiet of the morning, in my recliner, I assumed that the house was still asleep. My laptop computer screen was shining through the darkness making it an attraction to see. The gasp startled me, but what came next startled me even more.

“HE LIED!” my wife exclaimed.

I never expected that statement. My wife's family was very devout followers of the Prophet, and in my opinion, over zealous followers of the Prophet's youngest son. Preparing any sort of presentation that would convince her that one could even form a question without fear of eternal damnation was a bridge that I was not yet ready to cross. I expected it to be a battle, from start to finish, with nothing to gain. I still was certain that we were following a prophet, but understanding that things were not as they seemed.

She almost grabbed my computer out of my hands to read. I was compiling a list of what appeared to be fear tactics in order to convince crowds not to question the use of "prayer cards." In the story, the Prophet gave an example of a man who tried to trick the "gift" by writing a disease on his card, and instantly, he was struck with the very same disease.

But each time the story was told, subtle differences were described. He ran screaming from the platform, and the audience was stunned. He fell dead to the platform, and they must have been forced to carry out his remains. He died six weeks later. Six months later. Still suffering with the disease to this day. It was impossible to see this story for anything other than what it was: an outright lie.

We continued to search, now both my wife and myself, growing more and more disgusted with each query. It seemed that no matter what tale

we examined, we ended up discrediting it and labeling it complete fiction. But in our minds, we separated the “message” from the “fiction.” This entire movement could not have been a lie, but clearly some of the claims the Prophet made were simply not true.

It was around November of that same year, we both decided that it was in our best interest to try different churches in our area. No idea where we would go, certain that we would not agree entirely with the sermons (mostly disagree), and would have the overwhelming feelings of being “pilgrims in an unholy land.” But it was not November that we executed our plan. My wife was very active in the home school programs, and many families were counting on her to help organize, teach, and facilitate the group – at least until the Christmas program. And while her involvement was less than the years’ prior, our children were active in the program. It would not be healthy to simply rip them out.

At the same time, I had a feeling that our decision would impact the emotions of our family during the holidays. Time would heal all things, but I wanted our children and our families to have a joyful Christmas – since it might be the last for a few years. We were going undercover.

It’s funny how you never realize a habit has formed until after you realize the patterns have become painful. A person with obsessive compulsive disorder does not realize that he or she is straightening each and every fork on the

table until somebody points it out and embarrasses them.

Religious tradition is much the same way. Most people never stop to consider *why* they participate in a ceremony or even bow their heads to pray for a meal. They just do it – because that’s the way it’s always been done. Over time, and through tradition, the real meaning behind any tradition is lost, and it becomes something you *must* do instead of something done for remembrance of a greater event. It isn’t until someone comes along and makes them feel remorse that changes are made.

Our first Christmas program, filled with mostly “Bride,” was a sudden realization that we had become drones enslaved to tradition. But not tradition to the Reason for the holiday as some might expect – we were enslaved to a different kind of tradition. And we were amazed that we had never noticed it before.

The Christmas program had the outward appearance of celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. Crosses and stars glittered in the church building that we had rented from another pastor. Another pastor leading people who did not believe the Prophet – which meant that to the “Bride,” this generous pastor and his congregation were eternally damned. The skits were all stories one might expect at Christmas time – nativity scenes, children in pajamas saying their prayers on Christmas Eve, Christmas carols and more. Any who passed by, taking a quick

glance, would receive a heartwarming view at a Pentecostal-style people celebrating the Founder of their religion. And they were, but not the founder that a causal glance would reveal.

It was not apparent until the scene changed to a child's bedroom. Children in pajamas, kneeling and putting their hands together in prayer over a twin-sized bed. Cardboard walls with soft tone colors and a white window. The scene of a humble home, a faithful child, praying to the Lord in heaven on the night before Christmas.

The prayer was not a wishful prayer, the child begging God for their favorite toy. It was not a Christmas prayer, focusing on thankfulness in their little hearts for Jesus Christ – although Christ was mentioned and the Father was thanked for sending his Son. “Thank you, Jesus, for sending our Prophet, William Branham, to this earth to show us the way.” “Thank you for this ‘Message,’ God.” “Thank you that we are not like the rest of the [Christian] world.”

The children talked about the gifts they would give. While a normal Christmas skit might bring laughter at a sock or tie for the Father, or a hand-knitted potholder for the mother, these children were overjoyed at giving cassette tapes and CDs of “our Prophet, William Branham.” It was one big marketing campaign!

I began counting the times that William Branham's name was mentioned, comparing it to the number of times that Jesus Christ was

mentioned. Suddenly as the numbers started stacking up, I found myself staring in complete disbelief. We were sitting in a “Branhmas” holiday, not a “Christmas” one. Every single thread of the subject matter pointed one direction: to the “Prophet” for our day. Some might argue that they pointed two directions, the Prophet on one end, and his youngest son on the other. I’m not so certain that they would be incorrect.

It reminded me of the Easter celebration that was orchestrated by the organization a few years prior. While the rest of the Christian world was celebrating the day of the Resurrection, the “Bride” was celebrating the life and times of the Prophet. An abandoned department store was rented for the weekend, and filled with booths containing memorabilia, allowing visitors from all parts of the world to gain more emotional connection to the Prophet. At the multi-million-dollar headquarters, young actors filled the stage with short skits bringing the Prophet’s story (or at least the story we believed) to life through the hands of a playwright’s script.

By the time we visited family, we were thoroughly disgusted with what our lives had become. While condemning the world around us for living in what we claimed to be “idolatry,” we were arguably the worst among them. We did spend Christmas with family, and we were successful in doing so undercover. But in my heart, I knew that this could very well be the last, and things would never be the same.

The Shunning

There was a phrase my grandfather quoted in the church we attended, one pulled from scripture to describe those that had left the following in the days gone by. "They went out from among us because they were not of us." It was quoted frequently, sometimes even directed at believers in the Prophet, and especially when attendance was really thin. So often, in fact, that one fellow joked about it after a service that was pointing fingers at a well-loved family that had left the fold. "That works both ways, you know," he said.

It never really sunk in at the time, just how deep that simple statement was. There are always two sides to any argument, and just because you have the popular vote does not necessarily mean that your side of the argument is correct. Some people left because good conscience would not allow them to stay. But popular vote was not relevant to this situation. In fact, it was primarily the cause. There were many questions about the way in which church election was handled that year, and the answers given only raised more questions. The church was in complete disagreement on whether my grandfather should continue as head pastor, or whether the Prophet's youngest son should be the one to lead the people. Those in favor of my grandfather agreed with the situation, and those who wanted to push him out started raising several objections.

But at this point in time, and having consciously decided upon searching for a new church, the

debate on election of elders was not relevant to my family and myself. It has been several months—over a year—since I'd attended grandfather's church. I was more concerned with the questions I had uncovered about the Prophet than the questions about the breakdown in process of election and who should or should not be the temple's high priest.

Those questions would not rest. They were continually on my mind as the days progressed. By the first of the year, I was hardly able to think about anything else. Born and raised in the religion since birth, it was integrated very deeply into every aspect of my life. Removing any part of it was a removal of the essence of my being. It would be easier to give up an arm or a leg than to find fault with the Prophet.

And the questions seemed complicated. There was plenty to consider, and I was in no condition to examine them. The questions must have answers; pastors had studied the Message for over fifty years! Surely they must have been aware of them!

I found myself writing them down to help me study. Struggling with short-term memory from the illness, taking notes was the only way that I was able to remember important details. The worst of the depression was past me, but the constant pounding of my head was taking its toll. And that low-level increase and decrease of pain seemed to be directly related to how fast I could access past thoughts.

Eventually, I wanted to discuss all of this with my grandfather. He was one of the few men left who walked with the Prophet, and I felt certain that he had the answers. Not to mention the fact that he himself was a witness to many events, even behind-the-scenes. Having direct access to him gave me an advantage over other people. But if I struggled to remember details, how could I approach him?

My business was technology. Though business was struggling, I still had servers, website domain hosts, and a handful of clients. One day while working on software for mobile phones, inspiration struck. It would be very easy for me to place my questions on a server, access it from my phone, and have all my questions organized when I discussed them. My technology could be my memory. I configured a website domain, a list of about ten topics I'd studied, and within a few minutes had a working portable electronic memory! It wasn't pretty – mostly some notes I'd written and some information I copied from the discussion groups, but it was good enough to serve my purpose. I was seeking truth, no matter which direction the facts fell. So I chose a fitting name for my technological memory: seekyethetruth.com.

I tossed and turned all night. Sleep did not come easily, and had not for several years. But this night was especially rough – I kept imagining in my mind how the conversation would go. Grandfather was a gentle man, always quick to

smile. He had a way of making you feel good about yourself, even in the worst of times. There was nothing to worry about, really. He'd probably tell me that I was concerned over nothing, and give me several pieces to the puzzle that I was missing. I didn't think that all could be answered to my satisfaction, but I was fairly certain most of them could. I had always known my grandfather to be an honest man.

Mornings were dreadful. My entire body ached, sometimes a wrenching pain deep in my muscles that made a coffee cup have the weight of an iron anvil. It took a few hours to get going, usually spent in my recliner over the morning news. The next morning was especially painful, having been away most of the night. I had hoped to talk through my concerns, but this wasn't the day for it. I needed rest. But rest did not come. Instead, complete shock!

I never will forget the first telephone call. It was like an atomic bomb dropped, right in my stomach, knocking the wind from my lungs and stealing my voice. Then another call. And another. It happened so fast that I didn't know what had hit me. From what I gathered from the callers, the organization headquarters had discovered my website, even before Google's search engine had found it. Not only had they found it, they had somehow managed to link my name to either the website or the server. It appeared to be a sophisticated effort, not simply a casual or accidental discovery.

The experts at headquarters, Voice of God Recordings evidently began calling pastors around the nation, telling them that I had “gone rogue.” Pastors were telling elders, elders began notifying members and distant relatives by telephone, and before long, my own family began calling. I had calls of desperation, pleading with me to take my “website” down. I had pastors telling me that if not careful, I would cross the line between life and death. I even received threatening phone calls, threats coming from people I had known for years! In an abrupt cascade of events, my well thought out strategy of engaging my grandfather peacefully fell apart with the xylophone ring tone of an iPhone. It was my grandfather.

But this was not the calm, peaceful voice I had known since childhood. This was a stern, demanding voice, a voice that I did not recognize coming from a man I thought I knew. I was unprepared. I was not expecting to be on either offensive or defensive. I was expecting to simply ask a few questions, hopefully get a few answers, and then move on with my life. But this was not an option for the type of conversation that had exploded from a relentless rumor mill of accusation. I did my best to end the conversation quickly so that I could gather my thoughts.

But the silence of the phone did not last for long. Over the next two days, I would receive multiple calls from this man who once was my grandfather. And each time, the aggressive tone would become stronger. To be fair, I am certain

that I did not help the situation. Shocked from what had just happened, I was hesitant to open up about the questions that led me to my current state of affairs. And I was curious as to why the people I had known all my life were suddenly not the same. I had opened Pandora's box, and yet did not know what was inside. Whatever it was, there appeared to be a large number of people who wanted to keep it contained. Did they know something about the Prophet that I did not?

I raced to my computer to start searching. Anything and everything, I wanted to examine it. The prophecies. The spiritual events. The men who were "witnesses," and the men who travelled with him. I wanted to know about the prayer cards and the healing lines. The full history - good or bad - I wanted to know. I began searching through the translated sermons. I read through every discussion thread I could find on the Internet. Everything I could find about the Prophet, I read.

But it was not fast enough. Again, my grandfather telephoned - this time his voice audibly shaking with rage. He wanted to meet with me in private, asking me to leave my house to see him. He demanded that my servers be turned off, and that all of my questions be removed. "People have known this for years! What does it hurt you to believe it anyway?" he said in a harsh, rigid tone.

My wife walked by my office, and became curious as she noticed the look of shock on my

face. She came inside to eavesdrop, knowing that I was not in any state of mind to object. "I'm going to come down very hard against you and your family," he said. My jaw dropped. "Are you threatening me, grandpa?" I asked. He repeated his statement, and I started to lose my temper. The last statement he made was a desperate attempt at control. Threatening to breach his pastor / parishioner confidentiality, my grandfather quietly said, "It would be a shame for the public to learn the secrets you told me in private!"

I was angry. This was not only once my pastor, a man I fully trusted and confided in, this was my own flesh and blood. This was a man I had held hands with as a child, walking through fields on his farm. A man I had worked with, hard labor, sweating behind a wrench. A man I loved, I trusted, and would have taken a bullet for. This man used to be my grandfather.

"What are you going to do?" my wife asked. I did not yet know. I blurted out, "Tell them, grandpa." I'm writing a book, making sure that all are aware of what everyone has 'known for years.' I'll tell them myself." It was that moment, in the middle of that very response, that I decided to share my questions to the world.

By the following Sunday, my wife and I had lost everything. Publicly ex-communicated from the entire religion, we became outcasts to friends we had known for a lifetime and most of my family.

The Book

Socrates once said, "The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing." This is about how I felt when I began writing my first book.

I knew nothing about writing a book. Where do you start? How can you explain your position, without making the reader more confused than before they picked it up? How many words are in a book? Is five hundred enough?

As a child, I often dreamed of growing up to be an author. Not this kind of author, obviously, I wanted to write about cowboys and Indians, flying around the universe in starships, cleansing the galaxies of the evil dark lords. Westerns, science fiction, fantasy, fiction of all sorts was my release. I loved to read, and would sometimes polish off two paper grocery bags full of books in a single week. I had tried several times to write, even as a young adult, but found that "writer's block" starts at around page two.

I'm not sure what helped me overcome that block. Maybe it was my anger at the extremely rude telephone calls. Maybe it was my uncle whose anger made my grandfather's rage seem jovial. Maybe it was my curiosity, wondering what Pandora's box had been concealing for over fifty years. As my hands pounded on the keyboard, I realized that I already knew what the following Sunday held for us.

In my lifetime, I had seen several people leave the religion. Both friends and family had made their decision to walk away, and for the most

part did so quietly. There were definitely hard feelings, and family get-togethers were awkward, but those who walked away while showing respect to the Prophet were also treated with respect. Some said that their salvation was earned by being “kind to the ‘Bride.’” Others, the ones who vented their frustrations with the religion were different. It usually did not take long before they were forgotten, and never spoke of again. It was as though they were diseased, and then simply did not exist.

My gut was telling me that my fate would be worse. I knew of two family members that had been ex-communicated. One, an aunt, was under the Prophet’s blessing to my grandfather, “All your children and your grandchildren will be saved.” If a shunning was powerful enough to deny a prophet’s prediction, then what about those who accidentally angered the entire following? It was that very thought running through my mind that motivated me and gave me the strength to write. I could not trust that the version of the story told from behind the pulpit would match my conversation.

Fortunately (or unfortunately depending upon how you look at it), my wife had convinced me to purchase the sermons of the Prophet in digital form. We had to purchase it twice, actually – once for the audio portion, and a second time for the accompanying software search tool. I can remember being more than a little upset at the expensive second purchase—around five hundred dollars—simply to get the single

software CD that did not come with my original purchase. Could they not just sell me the single CD or burn me a copy? It couldn't have cost more than a few pennies!

I began examining the major topics chronologically using the software – what did the Prophet say in the beginning? What did he say at the end? Did it match the middle? Did it match what we were taught in our churches? Each topic I searched gave me a better understanding of why the pastors in the religion were upset – it was very clear that nothing matched. From the prophecies to the fundamental doctrines, all changed drastically over time.

I searched as I wrote. After only a few topics, I realized that it was easier to assume complete fiction than to assume truth – no matter which topic I started examining, I could pretty well guess the outcome: it was contradictory. Out of the many topics I searched, I was unable to find one single subject that I could not fully question. There were so many examples that a single book would not be enough.

By the time I made it halfway through writing my first book, I could no longer call the man a “prophet.” In fact, I could no longer call the man “brother,” as we were trained to do. I began searching my work to remove every instance of the titles I had used for the “Prophet,” replacing them with just his last name: Branham. Later, I decided to prefix them with “Rev.,” so that I did not come across as too judgmental.

But I was. Not a single prophecy appeared to have been given before the event. Some cases they were not even mentioned until several years after. The number of “witnesses” grew over time. Angels were inserted into his stories, and locations changed. It was all so confusing! I felt like I had been spoon-fed a lie, my entire life, sugar coated by men who knew. And some of the men were family!

My hands were literally flying – my fingers pounding on the keyboard, aching and barely able to keep up with my train of thought. At over a hundred words a minute, the book was quickly coming together. I was on a timeline; I wanted this book to be in the hands of everyone before the rumor mill started. There was no telling what sort of evil beast I would become as the story grew from mouth to mouth through the dreaded “Bride” rumor mill. Within four days, and not even taking a single minute to proofread the result, I published it to the site in digital form.

What happened next shocked even myself. I expected that a few would read it, possibly a handful from our local churches. I’d be lucky if a hundred read it. If a thousand read it, I’d probably be dreaming, and wake up to a strange nightmare where my friends and family were all turned into zombies or possessed with apparitions to cause what I had just experienced. But within a day, it nearly brought my server down! Thousands of downloads, from around

the nation, were taxing my server. Foreign nations began downloading the book – countries that I did not even know existed. How could I keep this running? Do I have enough bandwidth to support all of the downloads? What was this going to cost me? I was forced to upgrade my server, and expand the number of download locations.

I was later told by one of my sources on the inside of Voice of God Recordings that the book nearly brought the company to a standstill. All around the building, people were downloading the book, reading it as though it were a best-selling novel. It was the private conversation around the water coolers, and when people walked into an office, those behind desks would quickly try to hide what they were reading.

Similarly, the people in Grandfather's church were highly interested. It would seem that my grandfather's ex-communication speech was the best advertising that I could ask for – better than if I had spent thousands of dollars for an ad campaign. They told their friends and family, their friends and family told theirs, and the power of the rumor mill drew the crowds to my tiny server. I was not able to upgrade before the load brought it down, bringing my business clients down with it.

This increased the number of telephone calls and text messages, this time from an angry mob. And that mob was not just my business clients. My own uncle accused me of being a homosexual (I

was not), and within minutes my own mother called to tell me that my hidden sexuality was similar to other people she had known. It was overwhelming, “friends” who had not contacted me since long before my battle with depression now calling me to see if the rumors were true. Toying with them, I’d say, “what rumors,” so that I could listen to their uneasy voice as they squirmed around how best to ask me. I knew it didn’t matter, because the majority of them would end the conversation with an insult, a threat, or a curse. It became predictable, and I started to know exactly what they would say before they said it. One by one, I had conversations with friends and family that ended with how displeased they were at my “demon.” I received sympathy cards, families letting me know how “sorry” they were that I was going to hell. I knew it would be the very last conversation many would ever have with me.

Though my wife fared better than myself, she began also losing friends. “It’s funny,” she said. “Your grandfather included me in his curse, and didn’t even check to see if I still believed. I might have gone back to church, had he not banned me! Do I not matter to him? “By the time it was over, I went from hundreds of friends from one end of the nation to the other, down to a number I could count on almost one hand. Even my best friend would not contact me for the next two years, only to eventually tell me that I was no longer welcome in his home. “I’ll love you no matter what,” he’d tell me. “But my wife doesn’t want you back here again.”

I began to realize that this was not a Christian religion. It was a cult, plain and simple, and the people were trapped inside of walls they themselves created. Those before me who walked away were leaving people trapped behind invisible iron bars. And what could they do? They are just one small voice in the eyes of what I thought was hundreds and later learned to be millions. It was not a "little Bride" as we were told. It was a staggering number that chose this denomination of faith.

But my last name was recognized. If anybody were to expose this cult, it would take someone like me, with a familiar name. Was I ready?

The Game

J.K. Rowling said, “We do not need magic to transform our world. We carry all of the power we need inside ourselves already.” Looking back, I can say that this fully describes what came next. But at the time, I almost thought I had been given a superpower. Some would call it a “gift,” others the Hand of God, and I’m sure that the religion’s headquarters would call it their curse. At this point in time, I referred to it as “the game.”

It was great fun, this game. I couldn’t really explain to you how it worked, but that it seemed like pure magic. I had channeled some form of Assistance, and He was helping me with every single touch of my finger to a keyboard or a mouse. I couldn’t break it! No matter how hard I tried to see if I could make it fail, it never did.

As a teenager, I made what I thought then to be a mistake. Choosing the wrong “filler classes,” I found myself in a “speed reading” class for my seventh grade. This class was designed to help students who were slow readers to become faster, and advanced readers to polish their skills. Myself, having read hundreds of books by this age, was far too advanced to have been in this class. I quickly found myself turning pages in a book faster than some could read a single paragraph, and retaining the subject matter as though I’d sat down by the fireplace with the book and a hot cup of Earl Grey.

But it ruined my desire to read. Reading became a chore, and the great works of fiction that I once

enjoyed became jobs that I would have to endure through hard labor. To me, books were suddenly large blocks of wood, waiting to be split, armed with only a heavy axe and a maul. I no longer enjoyed them, quickly forgot about them, and stopped reading altogether.

But this mistake turned out to be one of my greatest assets. I could read through an entire cult sermon within just a few minutes. Sometimes two full hours of audio recording could be conquered in the blink of an eye. And I could retain what I was reading, though I struggled to remember it due to illness. Reading it with a notepad handy though, I found that I was able to plow through sermons at an amazing pace while taking a mountain of notes.

The “game” had a routine. Every morning, before the crack of dawn, I’d pour myself a cup of coffee, grab my laptop computer, open up my sermon software, and pick a sermon. At first, they were in order, starting at the end of his life and working my way back to the beginning, or starting with a particular subject and working through the sermons chronologically. The house was usually quiet, my wife and children asleep, and it was very easy to concentrate without distraction.

But this morning study became very strange. As I started speed-reading sermons, looking for anything and everything that was abnormal, the process became easy – too easy. Taking mental inventory of the style of the sermons, I noticed

patterns of speech. These patterns were very obvious when the sermon was dissected into logical elements. You had the opening statements, usually welcoming “friends,” pointing out those people who were recognized. Some of these people appeared to travel with him from town to town, all over the nation. Even in his home church, where the entire crowd would have been friends, key personalities were identified. It was all part of the strategy.

Next, he’d introduce the sermon. This usually began with his choosing a single verse from a single book in the Bible, and telling the crowds that he was going to get his “context” from this verse. I’d never noticed this before! The context of scripture would require several verses, sometimes more than one chapter. If the listener wanted the context of what the Bible was telling them, they’d appeal for him to read more. I can only imagine several in the crowd continuing to read, completely missing what came next. And it was the important part.

The cult leader WAS the context. There was never any intent to learn the context of the letter or book that contained the words; it was his full intent to apply the one or two sentences to himself or his “message” (as opposed to his sermon, which he was speaking at this moment.) But this would be disguised as a sermon pointing to Christ, the founder of the religion. Taking that single verse, he’d often tell some example in his life that raised curiosity and bordered

supernatural. Some times, he'd claim the supernatural. As he continued expanding his claims, while tying them to scattered verses throughout the Bible, listeners would begin to focus more upon him than upon Christ. All while they believed they were focusing on God, they were focusing on God AND the cult leader.

He would often turn to humor as his next transition. It was usually simple stories, the kind that everyone could identify with, and he'd pretend to be amazed. "How many people are here from Kentucky, anyway?" he'd exclaim. This turned my stomach, after only a few hours digging.

Since my childhood, we were told wonderful stories of a young Prophet, roaming the hills of Kentucky like a tale from Huckleberry Finn. How he and his several siblings used to crawl into their beds in a tiny log cabin near Burkesville, Kentucky as his widowed mother would tuck them in. He'd often tell of the "castor oil" that he'd be given as his "medicine," and how "coon grease" was used to open their eyes the next morning. We joyfully sang songs of praise to this cabin. "The Cabin's Location" could often be heard playing in many of the homes of cult followers and even on the platform of some cult churches. The songwriter had instant fame, many recognizing her gentle voice and tinkling piano as she sang in honor of the log cabin that raised the man, William Branham.

But as I read through the sermons, I noticed that the cult leader had also “prophesied” that he would leave Kentucky before he was fifteen months old. Barely old enough to walk, only old enough to have a limited number of words, this toddler was supposed to have predicted the families relocation only months prior to their leaving the hills of Kentucky and starting life in the bustling river cities of Indiana. Shouldn’t he be asking the crowd, “How many of you are from INDIANA, anyway?” But Indiana did not bring the same emotional connection as Kentucky. Kentucky painted a picture in the minds of the people, one of a backwoods simpleton.

What came next was a bit more complicated. They were miniature patterns; all repeated in a rhythmic beat, which almost felt like a strange, demented poetry. And the patterns changed, depending upon the year of the sermon and the circumstances under which they were preached. I started paying close attention to the names of cities and people mentioned, so that I could compare it to the nation’s history and politics of the day. Some patterns were an appeal to topics many would have been familiar with at the time, using them to his own advantage. Others were emotional, significant milestones in the nation’s history that many would recognize. Some even focusing on numbers, which coincided with his “lucky numbers” from the newspaper. Most were cultural. The fear of change was a powerful asset, and speaking harshly against the change would have connected with many of the older listeners.

But many of the sub-patterns were all woven together in one larger scheme: fear. There was the communist scare, which lasted for years, and fueled many of his predictions. There were the Birmingham race riots, which appealed to people differently depending upon which part of the country they lived. To the North, it was a terrible time of division, man fighting with his fellow man. To the South, it was the fear of the crumbling of Segregation, and preaching to them, he'd claim that it was evil; man should be segregated.

He'd inject himself into these fear patterns. Claiming to be the "spirit of Elijah," he'd tell stories that resembled passages from the Old Testament, even giving nicknames so that the listeners didn't miss it. One African American lady in his stories was so unfortunate to be given the racial slur "Aunt Jemima" in his sermons, while blessed enough to become nicknamed the "Shunammite Woman" from 2 Kings 4. Elisha, having the "spirit of Elijah," had visited a woman in need just as our "Prophet" had done!

The patterns were simplistic and easy to identify. But we'd never noticed them before! Thinking back, the audio also had patterns that matched all of these. The calm, gentle friendship of the opening statements turned into solemn reverence for reading the single phrase that was to be context of himself. The voice would turn to laughter for the humorous stories, and to sadness as he injected his own life into the

sermon. The emotions of the crowd would have been bouncing like a yo-yo. Then, with each of the miniature sub-patterns, the cult leader would scream with a Hitler-style barking, and then becoming calm and quiet to build curiosity for his main points. For the main points, he'd speak with authority, often slapping the pulpit and making the microphone pop. It was a very well orchestrated effort, one that came with a great deal of practice and possibly education.

Even the "healing lines" had patterns, depending upon the year. In the early years, a limited number of prayer cards would be called to the platform before the "color patterns." "You in the red dress," he'd call out. "You in the blue sweater." Memory association is powerful, especially when the color cards are sitting right in front of you at all times. They were not always colors, and not always the same strategy. Sometimes, he'd "envision" a person sitting in the audience with an illness of some sort, the listener forced to assume that the patient had entered the building without telling a soul. And maybe they didn't; many in the crowds followed the Prophet from town to town, using "prayer cards" in other cities. Later, after mass production of the transistor radio, he would claim divine intervention for a "change in his ministry." In this change, he could go for hours at a time guessing the names, addresses, and diseases.

It was a game, understanding these patterns. Similar to a chess game, one where you know

your opponent's strategy. It's very easy to guess the next move when you know the sequence. Before long, I could tell when he was building emotion, when he was opening the mind with humor, when he was using quick repetition to mentally program a response, when he was appealing to their senses in any way. But most of all, I could tell when he was lying, because there were words transcribed onto the page.

Turning Milk Into Wine

Martin Luther once said, "Whoever drinks beer, he is quick to sleep; whoever sleeps long, does not sin; whoever does not sin, enters Heaven! Thus, let us drink beer!"

One of the biggest inconsistencies within our cult doctrine was the teaching concerning wine. It was a tee-totaling cult, refusing alcoholic beverage of any sort, even wine. Never was there a scripture quoted for it, and that is likely because there are very few passages that support that point of view. Several instances condemn drunkenness, but drinking wine has far more passages promoting it than offering any sort of condemnation.

Some pastors explained this by claiming that we were under a "Nazarite Vow" – not mentioning the many other things we were to avoid when honoring the Jewish custom, such as cutting of hair. And during communion, celebration of the Lord's Supper from the Bible, we were instructed to drink wine and not grape juice – because juice dishonored our Lord. In essence, we were told that what we used in honor of Jesus Christ (wine) was also evil.

My cousin who helped me through my deepest depression enjoyed drinking, much to the distress of his father. It was viewed as sinful, and cult members condemning it would often refer to those who enjoyed a drink now and then as "drunkards," even though a single drink would never bring intoxication. But during one of my many phone conversations with my cousin, he

opened my understanding a bit when he said, "but Jesus drank!"

Even non-Christians are familiar with the passages of scripture called "the Miracles," the most recognized miracle being that of Jesus turning water into wine. And though not as many are familiar with the passage, Christ himself was referred to as a "wine bibber," which carried implications of a historical Jesus who enjoyed a very large amount of wine.

On a business trip, my uncle still continuing to harass me with an abundance of text messages, I decided to determine which person was in the right: the man saving my life, or his father (my uncle) who was trying very hard to annoy me. I found an interlinear version of the bible online, with references to the Greek and Roman words and definitions, and an online Strong's concordance. Starting with Genesis and ending in Revelation, I went through every single passage of scripture that mentioned grape juice, wine, strong drink, and alcoholic beverage of any sort. Not only that, I searched databases of the early church fathers, including Jewish historian Josephus, to learn what they had to say.

Before long, I found myself writing another book, one examining drinking according to scripture. I titled it, "To Drink But Not To Be Drunken," after scripturally determining that it was more sinful to condemn a person for drinking than it was to actually partake. Proverbs giving instruction for strong drink, Apostles recommending the

drinking of wine, Jesus filling hundreds of guests with not only wine, but the strongest of wines, it was all there, in black and white (and sometimes red). But that trip was not the most interesting when it came to drinking. It was another trip, soon after I left the cult, which would change my life.

In a business meeting in downtown Atlanta, I found myself in the conference room of an expensive hotel with what appeared to be an expensive collection of liquors and fine wines. Having been a teetotaler all my life, I shuddered at the thought of being around “those drunkards.” (I actually knew better, having been in several business meetings just like this one with calm and respectable people drinking casually). But in these meetings, I typically ordered a large glass of milk, so that none would confuse my drink for anything but non-alcoholic. I’ll never forget the first bartender that I asked for milk. The look on his face was priceless. “You’ll have a WHAT???”

Sitting down at a table with business executives, I found myself sitting with a unique group of people. Some were from the United States, some from other countries, all enjoying a tasty meal as we discussed sales opportunities. The lady sitting to my immediate left was from Germany, and the idea of passing up good liquor for milk was foreign to her. “Why don’t you drink,” she asked.

For the first time in my life, I could no longer say, “For religious reasons.” I’d studied it, and there wasn’t really any religious reason at all. It was either personal preference or cult doctrine. In either case, it was an addition to the religion that appeared to have come in the 1930’s during Prohibition. The vast majority of Christians, throughout history, have enjoyed drinking, unless you count various groups of Gnostics, which were condemned by scripture. “Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink.” I refused, but she was very insistent.

I’d heard of the healing power of wine, and especially of the effects on depression. There were proverbs instructing “men of sorrow” to drink wine, and I was curious. But I was also very hesitant. I could just picture myself taking a sip and becoming instantly intoxicated, unable to control myself in front of my business associates. If I were to do it – and I had no desire to do so – I would rather take my first drink in private. But she was relentless.

“Come on, try it! In my country, everyone drinks, even the children. It helps calm your nerves while you discuss business!”

I took a sip. Honestly, it tasted like cat pee smelled – a taste I could never imagine anyone wanting to put into his or her mouth. It clashed badly with my food, and I knew that the combination should never go together even though I had no idea that “wine pairing” was even a thing. It was probably the worst taste I

had ever put into my mouth. And I took another sip.

All in all, I had about two to three tablespoons of the nasty drink, only to satisfy the persistent women next to me and move on from that topic of discussion. It wasn't even enough to feel the slightest difference in myself, and when the opportunity was presented, I moved from the table to mingle with the crowd. A few sips were enough.

Later that night, finally making my way to the hotel room, I suddenly noticed something was missing. Not sure what, I felt my pockets, double checked my wallet, and looked for the hotel keycards. Everything in order, I turned on the television and stretched out on the bed, propping my head on a pillow. Then I noticed it: my head.

Since as long as I could remember, the constant rhythm of pain in my head was torturing me. The pain was worse at night, even worse than that first thing of a morning, and never seemed to let up. But tonight, and for no reason I could explain, it was much, much less! I hopped back out of the bed, looking for my medication bottle to count pills. Surely I must have taken too large of a dose! And at a bad time for it – I couldn't be walking around like a zombie for tomorrow's business meetings! I found the pill bottle, and the few that I had collected for the trip seemed to be there. What else could it be? I remembered the wine. The sips of wine must have had some strange effect. Was this drunkenness? If so, it

sure felt good! But I didn't feel drunk, not even the slightest bit dizzy.

The next morning, I woke up fully expecting for the needles of pain to resume their torture. And they did, but not as harshly. I was so excited that I nearly forgot to put pants on before I left the hotel room. Anxiously waiting for the evening meal, it was all I could do to concentrate on my meetings. I had to find out! Could it be? Could a few sips of wine take away that pain?

That evening, I forced myself to drink even more. I couldn't put down a full glass, squinting my eyes and making awful faces as I drank what tasted like the inside of a rotten apple. More than a few tablespoons, I was able to get down at least an eighth of the glass. Then I became even more anxious, wanting to see if it had the same effect. If drinking wine was supposed to calm your nerves, it certainly wasn't having that effect on me. I was on pins and needles!

That night, and the morning after were much the same as before, only better. No pain, no dizziness, no drunkenness (I chuckled as I thought about it), nothing at all. I felt completely normal, suddenly as though I had a chance at a new life. I'd given up all hope at that life – being told by more than one doctor that depression would be persistent, and that medication would be my constant future. And it was, considering the fact that I could not miss a single day. Missing a single pill would not only make the pain much worse, it would soil my shirts – I would literally

start crying uncontrollably and have to return to bed completely soaked with tears.

Returning home, I braced for the shock as I told my wife what I'd discovered. "And I'm thinking about buying a bottle of wine for the house," I said. She looked at me. "YOU WILL NOT!" (Actually, she may not have said it out loud, but her eyes were certainly screaming it). Not knowing what to get, I bought a bottle that had a pretty label on it, and began my days as a "wine bibber that only sips". I didn't enjoy it, and couldn't force myself to drink it often, so I decided to drink a small glass of it on Monday evenings. I did so, reluctantly, and over time the pain completely went away. I started sleeping better, able to eat without an upset stomach, and started regaining strength. Before long, I was completely healthy, and quit taking the mound of vitamins, minerals, and medication that for so long I took daily. But there was one pill that I could not yet avoid. I looked down at the depression medication. "What about you, my friend?"

The business meeting was in mid December. By March of the following year, I was completely medication free. I had successfully turned milk into wine.

Dying To Find Henry

Henry Thomas Buckle once said that, "Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people."

This statement rings true with any religious cult following. When only one single man is the source of new ideas, and the elders are the only ones qualified to discuss "great spiritual events," the common people are left with nothing else but to discuss each other. What might start as a simple flaw in personality can sometimes end as a demonic spirit, or what most would call a simple trip to the grocery store might end up sounding more like a perilous trip up the mountain to meet some man of wisdom.

When a man or a woman chose to leave the cult, one can only imagine how the stories grew. As a child, it was horrific – tales of death and dismemberment, all stemming from instant "judgment" for "leaving the truth." I heard stories of heads severed from their bodies in catastrophic vehicle accidents, cars plunging into canyons as a family moved away to another town, and many other fates. These stories were always presented with some strange sort of pride; we were the ones that stayed and lived, while they were inferior and deserved their fate.

When I left the cult, these types of curses were applied to my family and myself. In the onslaught of disgruntled followers calling to pronounce judgment upon our family, I had a grand variety of deaths that I was about to receive. Some would call me to describe their

“spiritual dreams,” in which I suffered some awful fate. Others would use examples of the deaths that they themselves had witnessed as they watched others leave the cult. One story in particular was especially tragic. A poor soul left to be a “motorcycle renegade,” and was travelling up a hill at a high rate of speed. Not seeing the other side of the hill, a transfer truck was in the wrong lane and struck the poor soul head-on. His body flew from the bike higher than two telephone poles, and landed in pieces flat on the highway. He literally exploded.

And I never questioned these stories, though I’m not sure why. If everyone who left suffered tragic endings, it would be worthy of investigation. There’d be news reporters, police investigation, interviews and depositions and more. We’d have federal agents knocking down doors to find out why!

When I started researching “Henry Branham,” I had no idea what was coming. I never stopped to think about those tragic stories of those who left, and ignored the many curses that were placed upon my head by disgruntled cult members. They affected me about as much as if they’d stood their with a water hose and sprayed my house as I looked at them through a window, and were almost as comical to visualize.

I had been searching through hundreds of newspaper articles, mostly finding advertisements used to promote the Branham campaigns. Some were full-page ads, describing

all the awes and wonders one could imagine – almost as if you’d picked up an advertisement for a circus. “See the next wonder of the world!” “You’ll get thrills, chills, as you see the roaring lion scaring the people from the ring!”

In 1933, there were some local advertisements, nothing significant. This was the year that Branham supposedly started his ministry, claiming that he was commissioned by a God who spoke from the heavens. According to his story, there were thousands to witness the event, and newspaper reporters standing by to capture the details. These reporters were said to have printed a story that the Associated Press published in newspapers in multiple countries – and yet, not a single copy can be found from any city in any state. Sometime later, another cult researcher would find one single story about a handful of people being baptized, but not enough to justify Branham’s claims. Nothing was mentioned outside of normal preaching and baptism. From 1933 to 1947, almost nothing could be found. There wasn’t a single story to back up his many claims of newspapers thrilled with his prayer campaigns and supernatural signs.

But in 1947, there was a sudden appearance. Not by William, however, it was an appearance by his brother Henry. According to William, the reporters got his name wrong, incorrectly printing “Henry” instead of “William,” but as I searched the newspaper archives something just did not add up. How could they get this wrong?

This was no small gathering in Vandalia, Illinois. It was well advertised ahead of time, and a large portion of the city was overrun with people from miles and miles around. A massive tent, filled with an unusual amount of technology for its day, the reporters marveled at the fact “Henry’s” voice could be heard throughout the city on practically every city block. Henry himself was described much like a river boat gambler, nattily dressed as opposed to what remembered in the cult leader’s descriptions of the early days: a humble worn-out suit coat and seersucker trousers.

The fact that Associated Press reporters were present would suggest that the advertising was successful. Though Vandalia was near the highway it was not a large town. Likely chosen because it was easily accessible with plenty of grounds to pitch a large tent. But it was not the sort of town that would attract reporters for the Associated press. More than an hour away from St. Louis Missouri, Evansville Indiana, Springfield Illinois, and over four hours drive from Branham’s hometown in Jeffersonville, it was not on anyone’s radar. This tent meeting would have not been a normal attraction for anything outside of local Vandalia news, and must be advertised in order to attract AP reporters. To have been there would be to have known whom, exactly, you were going to see. Henry.

It was this author’s personal opinion that Henry WAS the faith healer they found when they

entered Vandalia. It was well known in the cult that William's brothers helped work the crowds in the early years of the Branham campaigns, and I could envision a scenario where brothers took turns alternating between playing card-collector and being the man who guessed the information on the cards. I began searching, asking, digging for anything and everything I could find about Henry Branham. I should have seen it coming, but I did not.

The email came in late one night, just as I was preparing for bed. A desperate plea to help a less fortunate lady, the subject matter appealed to my compassionate side. I had just come through a very harsh time. I knew what it meant to be down on your luck. In a short amount of back-and-forth conversation and a telephone call, I was given a location and a telephone number for the person in need. I replied with my assurance that I would do everything within my power to help.

She was a relative of Branham's sons, though I knew very little about their family outside the siblings and one uncle. Widowed, no other relatives, out of work and out of money, she was holed up in a cheap motel for her last remaining night. Everything she owned was with her, which I was told did not amount to much. And she was desperately pleading with the Branham brothers for help, only to be turned away.

It wasn't until the next morning when I finally made contact. It was a Sunday, and my wife and

children were getting ready for church. I offered to pick her up and take her to our Sunday school, hoping to learn how Southern Baptists handled desperate cases. I knew that we worked with an outreach program for the homeless, and she definitely was falling into that category. When I arrived at the motel, she was exactly as described. Obviously poor, but clean wearing what once would have been nice looking clothes. Offering her breakfast at the local Dairy Queen, we talked a bit about her situation to break the silence.

I did not recognize her last name, and her first name was common. I was a bit skeptical at first, never having been caught in this type of situation before. She told her story, confirming everything that came to me in both email and by telephone the night before, but clearly was a different person with a different accent. But then, the bomb dropped: “I’m Henry Branham’s daughter.”

That afternoon, I engaged her in numerous conversations to learn the missing history from 1933 to 1947. We talked about the prayer lines, how they worked, her father’s involvement, and what she could remember from the stories she heard growing up. She was not alive at the time, obviously, and was not able to answer some of the more detailed questions, but remembered her father opening up towards the end of his life. We talked about the Branham family, intimate details that my family knew but that few others would know. I found myself shocked that anyone

besides my own father could have known some of these details about the Branhams – and it certainly was not public information. She talked about the two brothers, how she approached one of them for help, and the stern refusal. And then she pulled out a piece of paper, signed by a hand that I recognized.

This was the same signature that I had framed, hanging above my desk for almost twenty years. I knew it well. It was on a white sheet of paper, no letterhead, with a simple statement about a transfer of money. No amount was listed, and she said that one brother met her in a parking lot, gave her a very small amount of cash, and drove away. It seemed odd to me, why the signed piece of paper, but then the entire situation was odd. From Henry's daughter landing on my doorstep to the letter she held in her hands to the inside knowledge on the Branham family, something didn't add up. I quickly started talking with fellow researchers through an Internet chat client.

Using the name she had given me, one of the friends was able to pull up information describing her. The last name she had given me was one of her aliases, and there were others. It appeared that Branham was her original name, and she was indeed from Jeffersonville, but apparently was not an upstanding citizen. Right across the room from me sat a woman whose photograph I now viewed above a "WANTED" sign.

I called my wife over. "Look at this joke Emily sent me," I lied. My wife walked up, eyes got big, and she laughed a convincing fake laugh. "That's funny, she replied, "boys, come help me in the kitchen!"

As she and the boys went into the kitchen, the lady followed, giving me a chance to dial 9-1-1. Whispering into the telephone, I explained that we were in danger, and needed assistance. Within two minutes, four policemen were in our home and escorted her out of our house. A few weeks later, underneath the mattress in my bedroom, we found the .44 Magnum revolver that she intended to use.

The Underground Railroad

Harriet Tubman, civil rights activist who is well known for organizing the Underground Railroad that freed the lives of an estimated hundred thousand slaves was once quoted as saying, “I freed a thousand slaves – I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves.” As shocking as it may sound, this statement can be applied to almost any effort that frees the lives of people from chains of bondage – even the chains of religious bondage that comes from a cult. A person cannot truly be free unless he or she *wants* to be freed.

As time went on, I started coming in contact with more and more people who were either already helping people out of this cult—some of them had been for several years—or were willing to sacrifice their time and energy to help more. One family from Canada had a well established website promoting the cult, and had recently learned that they were promoting a false prophet. They joined in the effort with a massive undertaking: to re-write the hundreds to thousands of pages that had been up for several years.

Initially, we all joined forces with the discussion forum so many of us had found when we started searching. It was well established, and I later came to know that it was well known by many in the cult – which was a little shocking to me since I’d never heard about it. A handful of men had been publicly debating the more serious issues for a very long time, and a larger handful of men

were trying very hard to stop them. But it wasn't inviting. It felt cold and harsh.

More than one cult member informed me that when they first started searching, this discussion group had scared them into stopping. One went as far as to say that it was this discussion forum that scared him into staying in the cult, even while knowing about the issues. The leader and some of the users in the group were very quick to tell newcomers that their own version of the truth was the only correct version, and that all who did not believe it were doomed to hell. Each time the conversation came up, insults started flying from both sides. My experience was much the same. It felt very much like they were all trying to be that "Moses" who was famous for leading God's people out rather than being that team member who worked together to lead by creating more leaders. It put a very bad taste in my mouth.

I realized very quickly that if we were to setup a support network of any sort, we would need to do it with a more balanced group of people. We needed people with sincere compassion for others, truly intent on helping free those in bondage, and with the ability to examine their own hearts without a prideful sense of "I'm right and all others are wrong." Almost unanimously, we agreed to start setting up the new network of support and public information.

We created public discussion forums, where all were welcome to speak their mind. I began to

advertise it, and before long, it was up and running with almost two hundred users and thousands of people viewing from around the globe. We had private support groups, allowing seekers to openly discuss their questions without fear of being ostracized by their own families. Other groups were established to help those who consciously made their decision to leave the cult, while still others for the groups of people that had long since left the Message. The majority of people leaving decided to remain Christian, while a handful of people had such a bad taste in their mouth from this cult that they decided to leave religion altogether. An even smaller group left undecided, but leaning towards never setting foot in the door of a church building again. For these people who left religion, we set up another set of groups to help them cope with having been in a religious cult without feeling pressured back into it. In my mind, it was better to let them heal first, and then make their decision with a clear head.

All of these groups definitely had their challenges. At times, those of us organizing them felt like we had a mountain of work ahead. All of us were programmed, some would say 'brainwashed,' and were dealing with personal issues. Some dealt with greater issues than others. All were coming to terms with the errors, but were struggling as they tried to determine what, exactly, from their belief system to keep and what to leave behind. And each person chose a different set of doctrines to keep, some of

which conflicting with others in the group. And that was just the Christian groups we managed.

The non-religious groups were an even greater challenge. Many (not all) were very bitter. Like all of us, they felt like they'd been duped for their entire lives. They couldn't trust their pastors, elders, family, or friends. Most of them went through the same experience as myself – the majority of the people they knew had abandoned them, insulted them, cursed them, and left them for dead.

One person in the group was living in her car. Her own mother had kicked her out of the house when she no longer believed, and had no place to stay. Others, living undercover as cult members, wanted desperately to get away from their cult families, but was not able. A significant number of people were sexually abused by pastors or elders in the church, and a number of people were physically abused by family. People shared stories of abuse by fathers and brothers, from sexual to physical to emotional. And we had all suffered through spiritual abuse.

I will never forget the first person that came through our underground railroad. She was abused, suffered deep depression – more severe than mine – and told me the number of times that she had tried to commit suicide. “I realize now,” she said, “that this cult was responsible for all of it.”

At its strongest, the network was very similar to Harriet Tubman's underground railroad. We had numerous people inside cult churches, some inside the cult headquarters, and many throughout cities around the world, all finding people that needed help. One missionary for the cult in South America stopped using his mule to carry cult propaganda up and down the steep mountains from church to church, now travelling to help people out of it. Pastors, elders, missionaries, and more were supporting us, and the number of people visiting our website and support groups was overwhelming. Almost seven thousand cities worldwide were visiting, and you could tell when a person started into our underground railroad. Their city and the surrounding cities would suddenly light up with traffic, like the beautiful display in New York City at Christmas time.

With the visitors seeking truth, there also came an onslaught of people trying to prevent it. The hacker attacks were very comical at first, amateurs using brute force attacks with passwords like "JesusIsLord" and "Malachi4." Having helped manage corporate networks for enterprise-level companies, the first round of attacks were like throwing sticks at Fort Knox. But over time, these attacks grew more and more sophisticated. Several times, my servers were compromised, and a few times I had to restore data from backup disks. Out of all the sites I hosted, the cult awareness website was the one most commonly attacked.

At times our email was compromised, other times our private chat conversations captured, and some of us suspected our telephone conversations were overheard. I myself had private conversations that followed with a suspicious telephone call from an unknown person digging for more details to the earlier private phone conversation. Fortunately, I'd been around security enough to know what can be said securely and insecurely. Nothing could have been captured that I would not say to the faces of the men who were using religion as a cover for what looked very much like organized crime.

Nevertheless, our underground railroad was largely successful, thanks to the many people that helped us from both inside and outside the cult's headquarters and churches. We had a very good group of people helping to organize it, and many from around the world expressed their gratitude.

Burning Bridges

Benjamin Franklin said that, "We are all born ignorant, but one must work hard to remain stupid."

That quote pretty much sums up the cult's response to the information surfacing about our "Prophet." Very few cult pastors were willing to address our questions. Those that did try to answer usually ended up fleeing, some of them helping their congregations with them. One pastor in particular called me one afternoon to discuss his "unique situation."

It wasn't all that unique, really. He was a pastor who came into the following in the 1950's, and was over seventy years old. Preaching it for his entire ministry, believing in what he taught. Branham's end-of-the-world predictions were at hand, and any moment the nation was to be ravished by the communist movement. He sincerely wanted to help save people in his city.

But he had convinced his parishioners of Branham's predictions, so much so that unveiling the truth would overturn his ministry. And at seventy years old, there wasn't much else he could do to provide for himself. He was forced to continue preaching what he did not believe and eat, or to be honest and go without food.

Multiple pastors contacted us, many with this and worse situations. All had fully believed every single teaching, but upon finally studying it, realized that there was grave error. They could stomach the small conflicts, but some of

the issues overturned the very core of the cult doctrine.

It was almost overwhelming. We were a very small group of people trying to help hundreds around the world. My wife became active in the support groups and underground railroad, while I did my best to answer each and every email that flooded into the website. The Canadian group was growing, a small handful of people helping much the same way as my wife and I – the men meeting personally or virtually with those seeking freedom, while the women helped provide support.

But it was not an unbearable task. Over time, the supported became the supporters, and some very knowledgeable and compassionate people started helping. Major cult churches started imploding in multiple countries, each setting more people free. Some of those people also had a strong desire to help others free. Before long, we were a strong force, finely tuned, dedicating every spare minute to making each journey to freedom a comfortable one.

But there was one group of people helping that were still unknown to most of us. While we were a finely tuned engine of research and support, they were a Formula One racecar barreling through mounds and mounds of government documents. It was truly amazing when they'd post an update to their website – every single person would begin talking about it, even those of us helping free the enslaved.

By this point in time, everyone was aware of the major problems with the cult leader's claims. Where he claimed that angels descended from heaven to reveal the seven mysteries, most were aware that the "mysteries" were copied from books and drawings written in the early 1900's. Where he claimed to be standing under these angels in the state of Arizona, he was actually standing in Houston, Texas. An aerodynamic car prediction came from engineering mastermind Normal Bel Geddes at a World's Fair the cult leader attended. A self-guided car prediction came from a newspaper advertisement by an electric company. All fundamental flaws to the claims of his prophetic gift, the evidence against the cult leader was enormous. And yet, cult pastors were pushing as hard as they could to raise doubt against the facts to their flocks. But there was one set of facts that they simply had no possibility of doubt: the ones presented by a group of people that called themselves "SearchingForVindication."

According to their website, this group started out literally searching for vindication of the prophetic gift of the cult leader. Out of the many claims made, there was one single prediction that had a large amount of government record to review: the bridge prophecy. If his prophetic gift were authentic, this search would confirm his gift. Historical fact cannot be taken any other way: it was fact.

William Branham claimed to have been given a vision by God twenty-two years prior to the construction of the Clark Memorial Bridge that joins Southern Indiana to Louisville Kentucky over the Ohio River. In his descriptions of this vision, Branham claimed to have seen the deaths of sixteen men as they fell from the bridge. The problem with this prophecy was that there is no record of sixteen men dying during the construction of this bridge. Another bridge, the Big Four Bridge, is well known in the area for its casualties during construction. And it was built long before Branham was born.

Even within the cult, some were aware that there were problems with the accuracy of this prediction. Lee Vayle, one of Branham's closest associates, had found the newspaper article for the Big Four Bridge and claimed that Branham simply didn't realize he was "prophesying" of the past instead of the future. But still, cult pastors were able to raise reasonable doubt on the Clark Memorial Bridge, ignoring Vayle's discovery. Most, if not all, rejected the "past prophecy" scenario.

SearchingForVindication changed this dynamic. Making several trips into government facilities, they were able to collect and distribute copies of each and every coast guard log during construction, the architectural drawings of the bridge, the builder's report, and more. They'd publish their findings, and many around the world would become more anxious to see what they'd find next. By the time it was over, they

had not only overturned this failed prophecy, but several other supernatural claims made by William Branham. Even the claim that prophecies were buried in the cornerstone of his tabernacle in the year 1933 was overturned when they discovered the actual deed to the building in a future year. They must have had an army of people digging!

One afternoon, we received a telephone call from a family who recently came out of the cult. To our surprise, they were near our city, travelling from another state, and wanted to stop by our house to meet us. After our experience with Henry Branham's alleged daughter, we were hesitant, but said yes. I immediately took additional precautions to ensure our safety.

We had a wonderful chat with a young mother, father, and their children. Sharing cult experiences and the difficult journey out, we had a grand time with a family we'd never met. The husband requested to be excused, and went to his car to gather and bring some equipment inside. As he unloaded his bag, I rested my hand on the handle of my concealed sidearm, ready to do anything necessary to protect my family. When he pulled out what appeared to be camera equipment, I relaxed a bit.

He proceeded to setup the equipment, and I was not certain what he was doing or why. I assumed he wanted some sort of family pictures with us, but the equipment placed the camera pointed at the floor. I looked at him, and he

grinned ear to ear. "Know what this is?" he asked. I had absolutely no idea.

"We're SearchingForVindication!"

I would have been no less shocked if he had unpacked Scaramanga's Golden Gun, and told me that he was James Bond. The army I assumed to be very large in number was now standing in my room, and it was only an army of two. These two people had started a revolution, one that the cult headquarters could never stop. But they would certainly try.

Sometime later, in an act of desperation, Voice of God Recordings would interview the former mayor's son. His story would sound very much like the newspaper article that Lee Vayle uncovered, but the number of men would change to two, and the bridge it applied to would change to support the cult's claims. This testimony would satisfy some people, but definitely not all. Emails and phone calls started flooding in, people sharing their disgust for this feeble attempt at salvaging their father's reputation. It definitely worked in our favor, people realizing this did not match the prophecy. So I decided to use that to my advantage.

The library in Louisville had copies of the bridge builder's report and architectural drawings. These drawings were detailed enough to expose the former mayor's son's testimony, and I felt that these copies might benefit somebody. So I

headed over to the Library to make digital copies.

It took some time to copy all of the pages. I'd copy a few, open up the digital copies on my laptop computer, and continue on. After I felt comfortable that the duplications were good quality, I focused on my work, unaware that there were eyes around me with evil motives. When I had finished, and ready to leave, somebody had stolen my laptop, backpack, and everything in it!

I called security, and we searched every square inch of the Library. Turning up only my empty backpack, I thought some common thief had taken advantage of my using the copy machine. While setting my laptop on the table next to me, unaware that anyone was near, they had taken the equipment. How they got past me, I'll never know – it was a fairly open area. Outside the building, there wasn't much place to look. Construction was underway, and tall fences blocked most of the grounds. Only the parking lot and sidewalk were accessible, and everyone appeared to be casually talking or walking. I walked very quickly towards people to see if anyone would flee, but none did. After realizing that the thief was gone from the grounds, I quickly ran to my truck and started circling the blocks surrounding the Library.

Hours went by, and nothing turned up. I filed a police report, but they weren't able to help me. The detective prepared me for the worse,

“Usually when a laptop is stolen, we don’t find it unless they are stupid enough to take it to a pawn shop.”

Later that day, after giving up all hope, I received a phone call from the Library security. “Sir, you are not going to believe this, but someone returned your laptop computer, and several items that were in your bag. The person returning it claimed that they found it all lying on the ground outside!”

I knew full well that they were not lying on the ground, but I didn’t care. I raced to the Library to find my computer and all of my equipment intact, and I started moving it all into the backpack. Every single item was there except one: an external hard drive. Fortunately, all of my research was backed up to several places, and the library still had the documents I needed. What they tried to stop could never be prevented.

Taking Life By The Horns

They say that time heals all things, and I'm certain that both time and distance to any situation can make it less painful. Even the most difficult situations can bring some fond memories.

Leaving a cult was the single-most difficult thing our family has ever done. Watching our friends and loved ones turn from loving, caring people to an angry mob still opens wounds that seem like they will never heal. Those we respected as leaders now seem like wolves in sheep's clothing, knowing the right pathways in life yet choosing wrong for greed or power. Many we have helped escape will never speak to a mother or father. To family, we have a disease and must be quarantined. We are damaged goods in their eyes, and the bonds that held us together will no longer exist.

It is very evident which idol they serve. If a Christian remains a Christian yet no longer trusts a human being, most would agree that they are still brothers and sisters with other Christians. But this cult, and several other Pentecostal cults like it, requires that you believe Christ and their cult leader – otherwise you are banned from fellowship. Their connection is so strongly bound to the cult leaders that any connection to Christ is weakened.

It is the nature of a cult to separate. Members are trained to feel pride in severing themselves from others in their own social circles or even society in order to become unique in their own

way. They are trained to take pride in hidden mysteries, ideas that they feel others will perish without – and then do not openly share those mysteries to save the condemned. Instead, they damn the condemned, feeling power or control as they place curses upon their heads.

Many who leave cults suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. They relive their exodus, over and over, unable to eat or sleep. Emotions flare often, just thinking about what they left behind, and how difficult it was to leave.

I recently watched the American Sniper movie, the military thriller honoring war hero Chris Kyle. Action packed, most in the theater around me were enjoying it. But I sat there weeping through the entire film. After his first battle, returning home to experience life, he started showing symptoms of traumatic stress. It was painful for him, and the actor portrayed the disorder very accurately. I could relate to each and every one of the symptoms, having recently been through it. Though I was no war hero, and though I'd never experienced physical battle, my pain was just as real.

Since leaving the cult, I have made new friends around the world. To many in my family, I no longer exist, so I've started claiming some of my new friends as "family." Some of those new friends include old ones, the people that left my cult long before. I cannot even imagine what they must have suffered through without so many around the world helping them cope with

the harsh realities of the pain caused by people we called “brothers and sisters.”

A close family member recently gave me some good advice. Having made this journey long ago, he described how he was able to push through the fog without any support. And the advice was simple, words of wisdom. Simply put, you have to move on. They’ve forgotten you, you must forget them. They’ve cursed you, but you must not curse them. As a closely knit group of people, religious cults are very difficult to disconnect and reconnect – once you leave, that void where you once stood disappears as the group huddles closer together. Each person that leaves his place in line makes the group smaller, banding together they feel like they’ve grown stronger, yet the band becomes weaker.

Make no mistake – it is not correct in saying that we can no longer love them. Love, true love, is eternal. The version of love we had in a religious cult was conditional. However, as we leave and find true freedom, that conditional love is replaced with the authentic. But we no longer must show affection. Like a mother, showing a teenager the error of his ways, she will love him no matter the circumstances. But if he starts swinging fists to injure her, she will no longer show affection. Instead, she will protect herself.

We chose to protect ourselves. We have moved on, but can no longer endure spiritual or emotional abuse. Some of us will no longer have to endure sexual or physical abuse, and the

perpetrators are hopefully being prosecuted so that their abusive personalities can be corrected in a proper facility.

Trust takes a lifetime to earn and a few hours to destroy. It is seldom renewed after being destroyed. Many of us have lost that trust, especially in family who abandoned us during the time of our lives when we needed them most. That trust may never be rebuilt, and most likely will be replaced in friends who show unconditional love.

I was truly raised to hate a thief and a liar. It was integrated so tightly into my personality that it gave me a burning passion to break down the walls of deceit placed by a cult leader intent on stealing money from an unsuspecting people. And I hated that man, a man who could knowingly ruin the lives of millions during the course of his lifetime and even more long after his death. I hated him because he was both a thief and a liar, the two qualities in an evil villain that I was programmed to destroy. But I no longer do.

I feel sorry for the man. If the Book of Revelation that he claimed to be his legacy is true, and there is a burning hell judging the evil of the world, this man will be tormented for an eternity. In these eternal flames, he and his pastors who both refuse to teach what they know to be true and apologize for what they know to be false will burn in the hottest of ovens, wishing that they had made different choices in life. Unless he

repented for his sins before his sudden and instant death, William Branham will take his place in eternity, not on the throne he placed himself through fictitious visions, but in chains where there is weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. If the pastors do not repent, their reward will be much the same.

I no longer hate thieves and liars, though my programmed mind still tries to guide me in that direction. I no longer have the cult mentality of an “us versus them” way of life. I no longer see myself as better than others, no longer am filled with pride and scorn, and no longer rejoice at the demise of millions had failed predictions been fulfilled. I am no longer that person.

Instead, I hate that the thief must steal, either to feed their families or to satisfy personality disorders. I hate that liars feel insecure, unable to present truth without fear of consequence, or unable to be truthful due to other personality disorders. I hate that these disorders exist, and that even the best of men fall to them. In the version of heaven I believe, men and women do not rejoice at walking out upon the ashes of the wicked. They look around at them and weep, creating a future where such a tragedy will never happen again. In my version of heaven, we are not the victors – we are the more fortunate in a world of misfortune.

I survived a cult. It’s been an exciting journey, and will continue to be one. I’ve met many new friends, seen some new faces, and have started a

new life with new possibilities. New leaders are stepping forward to carry the torches for those of us who began the journey together, and when those leaders grow tired, others will continue. It is not a pleasant task, it is not a "game" as I once thought – it is a duty. We do this because we love, understanding that we no longer may be affectionate. We do this for the children, who are destined to have futures just as awful as ours, unless an invisible hand leads them into an underground railroad. We do this so that one day, the world is a better place because we stood firmly against thieves and liars, showing them a better way. We do this so that others, long after we are dead and gone, may some day say, "I survived a cult!"